

John 15:1-8
Sixth Sunday in Easter
Discovering the Hidden Messages of God's Word:
Easter Makes Me Jesus' Friend

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Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How do you identify yourself? It's one of those questions where the longer we think about it the longer the list of answers we come up with will grow. The most basic way we identify ourselves to other people is with our names. "Hi," I might say to a stranger, "I am Paul." Other times, however, our name is not enough. There are certain places where you may need your driver's license or a passport to identify yourself, others might need your social security number. When I go to my credit union I identify myself with a member account number, when I log onto my computer I use my finger print or a password. The number of places we need to have usernames and passwords today... it's unbelievable, isn't it? You need a book just to keep track of them all! How you identify yourself is really quite a complex question!

There's another level of complication that we can add into the mix: our relationships to other people. If a father is meeting one of his son's friends, he might introduce himself as "Charlie's dad" or "Jacob's father." A husband might introduce himself to one of his bride's friends or coworkers as "Sharon's husband, Don." If I were out with any of you and met someone you know I could tell them, "Hi, my name is Paul, I am *so and so's* pastor." One of the biggest ways we identify ourselves is by our relationships to others.

With so many different ways to identify who you are, how would you answer if I asked you to do it as best as you possibly could, but only using one descriptor? Perhaps to find the single greatest description of "who we are," we would need to look at the single greatest relationship we have: our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now that's a bold assertion to make, that your relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship you have, but to back it up I would simply take you to a passage in Isaiah 53. Isaiah tells us that Jesus **was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed. He poured out His life unto death... for He was bearing our sins and making intercession for our transgressions** (Isaiah 53:5,12).

To put it as Jesus Himself did in our Gospel lesson this morning, **Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends** (John 15:13). Our greatest friend is Jesus. Our greatest relationship is the one we have with Him because He gave up His life to save us from dying the eternal death we deserved because of our sins. I chose that passage from Isaiah to highlight that truth because it's one we saw just last week. In our first lesson last Sunday, we heard an account from Acts 8 about a man from Ethiopia who was reading Isaiah 53 and who learned that it was all about Jesus from a man named Philip. As he came to learn from Philip the depths of God's love for him through Jesus, that Ethiopian man's heart was changed. The Holy Spirit, working through the gospel message created saving faith in His heart. He was

baptized and went home rejoicing in His relationship with Jesus. His life had new meaning and purpose. He had peace with God. He was now a friend of Jesus.

Fast forward three chapters to our text this morning from Acts 11 and an awful lot has happened. While men like Philip were able to share that peace-giving message of salvation through Jesus, external peace for disciples of Jesus was in short supply. Right after the account of Philip and the Ethiopian ends we read, **Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples** (Acts 9:1). We meet Saul back in Acts 7 where he was present as the members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Jerusalem, put a man named Stephen to death. Stephen was stoned to death because, like Philip, He had been sharing the message about Jesus, that He was the Messiah and that all who placed their trust in Him would be saved.

When Stephen died it was like the opening of a floodgate, persecution against the infant Church exploded and those with faith in Jesus as their Savior were forced to flee Jerusalem for their lives. Saul became an unstoppable force. He tore the followers of Jesus out of their homes and had them thrown in prison and when they all had either been arrested or fled for their lives, He went after them.

He set out for the capital of Syria, Israel's northern neighbor, to find Christians there and have them brought back to be imprisoned in Jerusalem. But on the way, the thing Saul least expected. Jesus, the very man whose disciples he had been persecuting, a man whom he believed to be dead, appeared to him. The great persecutor of God's Church became one of its greatest champions as His heart was changed by the miracle of God's gospel. He now knew that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah. Jesus commissioned him to take that news to the Gentile peoples and so he went to share Jesus with the people of his hometown of Tarsus, in modern day Turkey.

Meanwhile, the Apostle Peter was sent by God to meet with a Roman centurion named Cornelius, and through that visit Peter also came to understand that God's message of saving grace was for not just for the Jews but for everyone, including the Greeks and Romans as well. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was able to share what he had learned with the rest of the believers there.

That brings us to the snapshot we saw this morning of the growing church in Antioch. Antioch was a city about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. At over a half a million people, it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. This is what we're told: **¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.**

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

How do you identify yourself? Philip and Stephen, Saul and Barnabas and Peter, the believers in Antioch—men and women alike—all identified themselves in much the same way, they lived like friends of Jesus. As they met people or were introduced to them, what first became apparent was that these were people who identified themselves first and foremost by their relationships with Jesus. All they wanted to do was tell you about their friend Jesus, about everything He had done for them, about how incredible His love was. It wasn't just in what they said, though it was also how they lived their lives. So obviously were these believers in Antioch friends of Christ Jesus that people started calling them Christians.

New question then. How *we* identify *ourselves* as Christians? If my relationship with Jesus is the most important part of who I am, and clearly it is, how can I live my life in a way that lets other people know that; how can you? When I look at the picture of this congregation in Antioch I see three areas where they demonstrated well their friendship to Jesus.

The first is in persecution. It's tremendous when you think that the reason this evangelism work took place in Antioch was because of persecution. These people were uprooted from their homes, torn apart from family members likely never to see some of them again, they had to travel hundreds of miles and start their lives over in a foreign country surrounded by people they knew nothing about. And the first thing they do is start telling people about Jesus. The threat of imprisonment or death had made some drastic changes to their lives, but it could not and would not stop them from telling others about the love that Christ had shown for them by laying down His life to save them from their sins.

How well do we stand up in the face of persecution? When I have an opportunity to witness my faith through the actions I take or don't take, when you have an opportunity to show that you're a friend of Jesus by speaking up or by holding your tongue, how do we do? The persecution we're confronted with is far less threatening than that which the Antioch Christians had faced or that people around the world today in places like Africa and Asia and the Middle East are faced with. But sometimes, often even, just a reluctance to have a conversation that seems to be going well turn slightly awkward by identifying as a friend of Jesus is all it takes to change our actions or to keep us silent we should speak up.

God has forgiven you for balking in the face of persecution. He's forgiven you because His Son Jesus was perfectly faithful in His obedience to and His testimony about God no matter what the threat. Jesus has clothed you with His perfection, He has joined you to Himself through faith. And He now warns you that the world will threaten you just as it did Him, but He calls us to stand in the face of it, showing our love for Him just as He has shown His love to us.

The second way that the Antioch Christians showed themselves to be friends of Jesus was through their proclamation of the gospel. They started by telling the people they connected with more comfortably, the Jews who lived in the area who had a similar background and customs. They may not have been lifelong friends with them but there was a connection and it was enough for them to share with those people who Jesus was and what He had accomplished. But then they took it one step further. They started sharing that gospel news with people a little more outside their comfort zone, people from other cultures and walks of life that lived in that booming metropolis of Antioch. God blessed their proclamation and many people turned to the Lord and believed.

There's a lesson we can learn from that too. We can start by sharing God's Word with the people who we are closest to and most comfortable talking to, our family and friends, our co-workers and teammates. Close relationships are a great benefit when it comes to sharing our faith, but we don't want to stop there either. There are ways that we can meet new people from different circles, get to know them, form connections with them, and then share Jesus with them as well. We want to be on the lookout for those kinds of opportunities.

If we trace the progress and growth of God's church, we can see that that is how the message of salvation came to be preached at this little building in Winchester, VA. Jews started by sharing the message with Greeks, the Greeks in turn shared it with the Romans. Eventually, the Romans took the God's Word to England and from there it made its way to Germany where the full message of the gospel was rediscovered in the Lutheran Reformation. Germans moved from Europe to the New World and settled in states like Wisconsin, and from there our church body was formed and continued reaching out to new people from different cultures and different walks of life so that in the last 60 years we have almost 50 congregations here in our North Atlantic district ranging from North Carolina all the way up to Canada. All of that happened through the proclamation of friends of Jesus reaching out to people who weren't exactly like them to share the good news of what their friend Jesus had done for them.

Finally, we can see that those Antioch Christians were friends of Jesus through their perseverance. Paul and Barnabas came to Antioch and met with the believers they found there and continued to teach them. They encouraged them and urged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. In other words, they established as the basis of the congregation in Antioch the preaching of and dedication to God's law and gospel.

Those same doctrines are the glue that holds our congregation together as well and we can sum them up with two simple phrases. Jesus is your friend. That's the gospel. He chose you, like a little boy walking up to you on the first day of kindergarten saying, "Hi, my name is Jesus and I'm going to be your friend." You got no say in the matter. The decision was fully His. He chose you. "My name is Jesus, I love you, and I'm going to be your friend." And this is how He proved His friendship to you, He laid down His life for you to save you from your sins, to give you forgiveness and the hope of everlasting life with Him.

After He laid down His life for you He took it back up again. "I am your friend," Jesus says, "now, you be Mine." That's the law. **As the Father sent me now I am sending you,** He tells us (John 20:21). **You are my friends if you do what I command. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you** (John 15:14,12). Jesus' law guides us by showing us exactly how we can demonstrate our love and friendship to Him. His gospel gives us the power to do it. That's what Easter means for you and me, it makes us friends of Jesus. That's how we can identify ourselves: we are Jesus' friends; we are Christians.

Whether we face open ears and willing hearts or awkward conversations or even open persecution, may our friend Jesus continue to give us the confidence to proclaim His love to everyone around us and to persevere in teaching and living according to His Word. May others look at us and our lives and say, "they are Christians; they are friends of Jesus."

Amen.