

“FIRST CALLED CHRISTIANS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 11:19-30

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you for your Holy Scriptures, for their truth, wisdom, counsel, guidance, correction, training, promises, life-giving hope and help. In them you have revealed Jesus. Open our eyes and ears and the doors of our souls to receive your truth for each of us today. And to those who expect the least, by your grace give the most. May we all profit from hearing your Word. For the sake of Jesus, Amen.

Introduction:

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, tells us when the apostles sent Barnabas from the church in Jerusalem to the church in Antioch, he saw the grace of God.

What does that mean, he saw the grace of God? What does the grace of God look like? How can you tell when you are seeing the grace of God? Have you ever seen the grace of God? When was the last time you can definitely say you saw the grace of God?

I have spoken on several occasions about the importance of being able to recognize the grace of God, in your life. I have encouraged us to write them down, keep a list. I believe if you do this it will have the same effect on you that it did on Barnabas, it will make you glad. It will give you joy, encouragement, hope and increased faith and trust.

I see at least seven ways in our text that Barnabas saw the grace of God. See how many of these you have seen.

First, Barnabas saw the grace of God in a church that rose up out of the ashes of persecution.

Barnabas was sent from the church in Jerusalem. That means he was well acquainted with the persecution going on there. He knew about the constant attacks on the saints. He knew about the arrests of Peter and the apostles, he knew about the stoning of Stephen and the brutal assaults and murderous threats and actions of Saul of Tarsus.

So, when he shows up in Antioch, he sees the grace of God that turned persecution because of Jesus into preaching in the name of Jesus. To see that kind of fruit out of that kind of soil was nothing but pure grace.

No one expected this. Instead of dying, the church grew. Instead of being confined to one city, Jerusalem, the church spread across nations, across mountains and seas.

When suffering becomes salvation that is grace and that kind of grace has led to the growth of the church in every age all over the world. And what is true for the church is also true for us as individuals. Grace doesn't spare us from trials and hardship, it grows out of it.

What was meant for evil, God means for good.

What was meant for destruction overflows into righteousness (Is. 10:22).

Look for grace in the hardest places, look for grace in the broken and painful places. Jesus has always snatched victory out of defeat, resurrection out of death, glory out of a cross and persecution. Jesus is always taking all of Satan's efforts and using them and turning them for His glory and our good. In the difficulties of your life do you see God's grace and if not, ask Him to show you, it's there.

Second, Barnabas saw the grace of God in a church that was planted by ordinary people.

Did you notice who did this evangelizing and witnessing and sharing of the Gospel? Antioch wasn't evangelized by the apostles, but by normal, ordinary, average Christians, living their lives in challenging circumstances, who prayed and trusted and relied on the Holy Spirit.

The greatest work for the kingdom of God is done by people we have never heard of. Don't fall into the trap that significance is only associated with fame, or well-known people, each of us has an important part.

If you think about it for just a moment, hundreds and thousands of God's faithful followers and servants go into heaven unknown except by God. How many of us will be remembered by name a couple of hundred years from now? How many of us will have biographies?

But rest assured of this, your name is known by God. Serve God, do your work as unto the Lord, work for eternal fame and glory, and not for fame or glory here on earth. See the grace of God in the ordinary, see the grace of God in how He delights to use the weak and foolish things of the world to shame the strong and wise.

Do you want to experience the grace of God in a profound way? Share your faith with someone. I am not saying they will become Christians, but you will experience the favor of God that you spoke up, that you honored the name of Jesus, that you were willing to risk for Him.

Third, Barnabas saw the grace of God in a church that wasn't perfect.

Let me ask you a question about this church in Antioch. Luke says Barnabas saw the grace of God there. Does that mean it was a perfect church? Does that mean it was a church without flaws? Does it mean they were better than other churches?

What is grace? It's getting what we don't deserve. Barnabas saw beyond the imperfections and flaws to the hand of the living God doing things above and beyond what they had or deserved. In the midst of a bunch of sinners He saw God at work.

Some people look at sinners saved by grace and see only sin, others look at sinners saved by grace and see grace. When you look at the sinners saved by grace in this room or in your family, what do you see?

Barnabas was an encourager; his very name means "son of encouragement." Remember after Paul was converted, he came to Jerusalem and no one would let him in the door of the church. They saw only his past sin, who he was. Who got him in the church? Barnabas saw the grace.

Barnabas was especially good at discerning good in those who were underdogs and outsiders. He saw those who had been accepted by God, and he accepted them.

Barnabas saw the grace of God in a bunch of sinners from a very immoral city with radically change lives. He saw godly character, spiritual fruit, genuine faith, warm and open fellowship, heartfelt worship. Do you see God's grace in each other, turning us from what we were to what we will be?

I have a friend who is a retired pastor. His wife has MS. She is flawed, she can't do all the things he would like her too or expect her too. There is disappointment. But he loves her. In retirement he took some medical classes so he could better take care of her. He doesn't complain or compare her to others. In her weakness he is tender, caring, prayerful and graceful.

When you look at the Bride of Christ what do you see? The church is a glorious mess, she needs to be washed by blood of Jesus. Every church Paul wrote a letter to was flawed, filled with sinners, but his letters were full of grace and love. When we see flaws and lacks and shortcomings in the church, that is where our love is proven.

Don't sit in judgement on the church and her flaws, we are called to love church and pray for her and her leaders. Don't be bitter about church, no church is perfect.

Men, you especially should love the church of Jesus Christ. What you love your children will love. What do they hear you say? What do they see you do? Do you see grace and speak of it?

Fourth, we see the grace of God in the humility of Barnabas to go get Saul of Tarsus.

What a humble man Barnabas is. He could have had this ministry to himself, but he sought to bring Saul, knowing Saul would outshine him. He is more concerned about Christ and the Gospel and the church than about himself.

Do we care about who gets the credit, or gets the glory? Are we vying for position, jockeying for the lead or the spot light? Do we think more highly of others? Do we rejoice when someone succeeds or gets ahead or prospers? Or do we begrudge why they have blessings we want? (Moms, dads).

Are we glad over the grace of God in other people's lives? Where there is humility there is the grace of God.

And has God shown His grace to you by sending someone into your life to help, build up, encourage, to come along side, to open your eyes to Jesus? And having been blessed, are we sent to be a blessing to someone else. That is grace, too.

Fifth, Barnabas saw the grace of God in the hunger for the Word of God.

Where the Word of God is there is the grace of God. Where it was shared people came to faith. Where it was taught people grew in faith.

“For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people.”

How many of you just eat one meal a week? How would you do on one meal a week? How many of us come on Sunday morning expecting this one meal to last us all week? Is your soul weak because it is malnourished?

I think it is safe to say most all of us need more than we are getting. We need a greater hunger for the Word of God and the things of God. We need to come hungry to the Word of God daily. And on Sundays by all means come hungry and eager to hear from God. Pray for God's Spirit to speak to your spirit out of His Word.

Where there is a love for the Word of God and a hunger for the Word of God, there you will find the grace of God.

Sixth, we see the grace of God in that the disciples of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch.

The city of Antioch was a morally decadent place. In fact, when Rome was falling into greater wickedness, it was said it was the influence of Antioch.

Being a Christian in Antioch was counter-cultural, it was not politically correct, it proved costly in that godless environment.

Notice how this is worded. The disciples of Jesus were called Christians. They didn't call themselves by this name. This was the name the non-Christians gave them because they spoke so much about Christ. This name set them apart from other groups, they were not Jews. And by this name they lost their status in the Roman empire as an approved religion.

By this name they were marked as followers of Jesus, as those who belong to Jesus. They had courage to meet openly and to be identified with Christ.

By this name they were making a clean break from the world. By this name they showed they were all in, they were sold out, they wore the name of Christ as a badge of honor. Their distinguishing characteristic was they belonged to Jesus, He was their Lord. They loved Him more than the world, more than whatever privileges or honor could be had in the world.

And by this name they would be hated and persecuted and die for this name. It is the greatest name a human can have. There is no greater privilege than to bear the title of God's only Son.

God has rescued and redeemed us out of the world and brought us by grace into the precious blood-bought fellowship of His Son. The greatest grace of all is that we are here.

By this name the whole world will know that there is a group of people who claim Christ as their leader. It is by the grace of God that we are called Christians and only by the grace of God can we live up to it.

Seventh, we see the grace of God in a church that loved to share.

Being a Christian is not a name only blessing/privilege. Being a Christian call for action, calls for being Christ-like, for being caring, compassionate, giving, serving. There was fruit from their profession of faith.

God is a generous God who gives generously of His grace and gifts. What do we have that we have not received from Him? It is all grace, and where there is grace there is generosity.

This is a mark of a grace-filled church. Remember how we read about how drastically the Gospel reshaped the new Christians lives, so much so that there was no one with need in their midst.

These Christians newly entering into the church show they have a radical reorientation toward life. And a radical reorientation about money. They bring their money to church to give it to God for His glory because of His grace.

The Gospel totally changed their lives. They shared everything, their money, their resources, their faith, the Word of God. You see the grace of God in Christians attitude about sharing, about caring for others and for the lost and for missions beyond themselves.

They used their own resources to help others, and they did so without being asked.

Implications and application.

Some look at a fire pit and only see ashes, others look and see the smallest embers that can be fanned/encouraged into flame.

Is your faith tuned to pick up even the faintest signals of grace around you? Why is this important, why does it even matter, so what?

First of all, because it will make your heart glad, it will give you joy in the midst of this harsh world where everything seems to be getting worse. It will encourage your soul that God is actually present and at work, what He has not forgotten or abandoned us.

When I see the grace of God it makes my heart glad, it brings tears to my eyes, it speaks to a deep place in my soul. It is cause for giving thanks to God and cause for worshipping Him. *Second*, it encourages our faith and our prayers. The smallest sparks of grace in a child or grandchild are a huge blessing to a praying parent or grandparent, just waiting for some small answer to an earnest prayer.

Third, it gives us opportunity to come along side that grace the way Barnabas did and pour gas on that fire.

Acts 11:23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad; and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose."

We know how hard it is to live by grace through faith, so when we see it be quick to acknowledge it and give glory and thanks to God.

All of this happens by the hand of the Lord, when the favor of God falls on His people. Without God's grace and favor nothing of eternal significance will happen in our lives or in our church.

We all need the hand of the Lord upon us. I feel that more than ever here in our flock.

Are you praying for the grace of God to be clearly seen here at First CRC? In Serve 2020, MOMs at First, in a new Associate Pastor, in a building project for His glory, in an unreached people group being reached by the Gospel? May we see His grace and be exceedingly glad.