

June 2

Scripture:

1 Thessalonians 2:13

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

Acts 11: 19-26

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'.

## SERMON:

I've been helping out with the Interfaith Power and Light project of reclaiming the woods in nearby Walnut Springs Park. It's a beautiful little - by it's name I'm guessing it used to be full of black Walnut trees, a native species to this area. Today, if named, it might be called privet park. It's covered in privet, a highly invasive non-native plant that outcompetes native plants, making it difficult for less competitive plants like dogwood, redbud, black walnuts and others to establish themselves. So Greg Williams, a local enthusiast, gathers a group of volunteers to reclaim and restore this natural space, by pulling out the privet - they/we have cleared a large area, and just this spring it was re-planted with over a dozen species of native trees and shrubs. If you go down there right now you'll see a hundred or more of those green fiberglass tubes sticking up out of weedy looking soil. You have to use your imagination to see what it might look like 5, 10, 20 years from now, flourishing once again with a diversity of native species. But the work hasn't finished. The privet we pulled out last fall is coming back - it's tough stuff, and will need to be weeded out over and over. Kind of like the poison ivy I've been removing from around the foundation of the house I just bought. Reclamation is hard work - it requires patience, a vision for the future, and lots of pulling on the roots and replanting what's life giving and truly belongs.

So, it was while I was out there in Walnut Spring park one day, tugging away, that I recognized how intentional we need to be about both what we plant, physically and metaphorically, and how we reclaim and restore those things that are important to us. There are several words that I've struggled with as I've mature in my faith, and instead of abandoning them, I decided I want to do the work to try and reclaim some of them. This summer is about reclaiming some of those words....

Recognize visuals this season - Beckie and Vonda bringing reclamation into this space

So, we begin with a biggie. Christian. (Sing "I AM A C, I AM A C-H...)

Claiming Christianity is really important to me. It's who I am. My belief in Christ, my relationship with Jesus - it's at the core of me. Like Rachel Held Evans, the late author and blogger said in a podcast "My christianity feels like my gender. It's so much a part of who I am that I can't step outside of it." And I don't *want* to step outside of it, though I have been wary of the word, mainly because in our North American culture today, Christian feels like it refers to being anti-science, intolerant of inclusion, unwelcoming of refugees and others.

I asked my daughter, Ella, the other day, if she considers herself a Christian, and why or why not. There was a long pause... she said she easily identifies as a Mennonite, and so because of that a Christian. But calling herself a Christian is uncomfortable, to the point of not wanting to, because it requires a lot of explanation. She's wary of it for the same reasons I said a moment ago. In this country, at this time, being a Christian implies being narrow minded and exclusive.

I want to shout no! How do we reclaim this identity marker?

In the 1950's over 90% of Americans identified as Christian. While church attendance is dropping, still just over 70% of Americans consider themselves Christians, with non-Christian faiths accounting for less than 6% of Americans.

So what does it mean to be a Christian today and what did it mean back in the early church?

I've been remembering a painful conversation I had with one of my sisters about 20 years ago. She has not been a part of any faith group since leaving our childhood home, and yet she said she was a Christian. I asked her what that meant. What does it mean to be a Christian if you don't ever read the bible or go to church - she heard my questions as judgmental and condemning, and I think maybe they were. I'm somewhat ashamed of the attitude I might have presented that day. It's taken a lot of conversations over the years to repair that part of our relationship. But I still wonder,

what does it mean to be a Christian? Should I, should we, just be happy that someone is willing to identify as Christian regardless? My sister is a good person, she is involved in her community, trying to make this world a better place. Does it matter how we use this label? It's complex, isn't it?

This week I was listening to a RadioLab podcast entitled 'The Good Samaritan'.<sup>1</sup> Scotty, a former heroin addict from Kentucky, one whom was rescued multiple times by EMT's, talked about how he was changing his life. In his heavy southern accent he said "I'm going to church now. As soon as I get this ankle monitor off I'm going to get saved." - his understanding of what it meant to be a Christian was that until he was baptized through full immersion, and that wasn't going to happen until his ankle bracelet, a parole requirement, came off, he wasn't fully in the Christian club. He didn't belong. So, though the church and his belief in Christ has been integral to his healing, he still wasn't a Christian. Yet.

Are you a Christian, are you saved? (we'll save that word, saved, for another time) - I often heard that when I was a chaplain. I cringed when I was asked that, because for many, a Christian is defined as one who has been 'born again', or 'saved'. So said various websites I visited this week. One clearly spells out when a person becomes a Christian. For this brand of Christianity, a person must say something like "Jesus, I confess you as my Lord". You've got to say the right words and make it personal.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise you're not one of them.

In her introduction this morning, Esther read from theologian Frederick Buechner, where he said: Jesus didn't say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that *he* was. He didn't say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could "come to the Father." He said that it was only by

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/good-samaritan>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bccmn.org/webpages/What\\_is\\_a\\_Christian.html](http://www.bccmn.org/webpages/What_is_a_Christian.html)

him—by living, participating in, being caught up by, the way of life that he embodied. That was his way.<sup>3</sup>

*It's by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that Jesus embodied that we live the Christian life.* Yes, that's what it means for me to be a Christian. I can claim that.

I want to go back to the passage from the book of Acts - this is the first place that the followers of Jesus, the people of the Way, are called Christians.

The term 'Christian' was first used to describe a new sort of people that had sprung up in the Greek city of Antioch, it was used by non-Jews for those they couldn't quite figure out. This new group didn't fit into any of their pre-existing categories, they were neither exclusively Jewish or Gentile. So they had to invent a new name for them. The identifier Christian is never used in the New Testament by the followers of Jesus about themselves. It occurs only 3 times in the Bible - here in this text; later in Acts when King Agrippa exclaims: 'You seem to think it is a very small matter to make me-me, a king!-a Christian, one of those despised people!' And it occurs once more, in 1 Peter 4:16, where Peter says: 'If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf' This group in Antioch and the Gentile believers elsewhere are a novel element in the Church. Outsiders called them 'Christians' -Christ followers, just as they would have called Herod's followers 'Herodians,' in the political world, or Aristotle's followers 'Aristotelians' in the philosophical world. They had put their finger on the fact that the one power that held this heterogeneous mass together, the one bond that bound up 'Jew and Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free' into one vital unity, was a personal and communal relation to the living Christ.<sup>4</sup> Being labeled a Christian in the early church was a negative term, a term used only by outsiders, one which implied 'otherness' and the possibility of persecution.

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<sup>3</sup> Buechner, Fredrick. 2004 *Beyond Words: Daily readings in the ABC's of Faith*. HarperOne.

<sup>4</sup> <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/11-26.htm>

So what was going on that those early believers, disciples, followers of the Way, got this label, Christians?

Let's look a little closer at this reading. It starts out "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus." (Acts 11: 19-20)

For the early church, at first it was only the Jews that received the message of Jesus the Messiah, then Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit, so how could they be denied full inclusion in the Way of Christ? Now we read of a new mission among the Gentiles beginning in Syrian Antioch, an unexpected result of the scattering of believers that followed Stephen's death. This new congregation in Antioch seems to be growing at such a rate that they need more support, and who does Barnabas go and get to help him? Saul!

Go back to that first line in our scripture: "Those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen" - this is a cue to listeners referring to Saul - that evil man who was hunting down the followers of the Way. Saul was the reason they had scattered, went running for their lives. Saul who later is known as Paul, a disciple of Christ, is the one who led the persecution. It's this Saul who Barnabas goes and finds and brings to Antioch. Can you imagine welcoming this man you've feared, maybe even hated, as a leader? Our reading says "so it was that for an entire year they (meaning Saul and Barnabas) met with the church and taught a great many people...' another translation say, 'they were guests of the church for an entire year...'

It's this group who earns the title Christian. These people, Jews and Greeks, living together, worshipping together, eating together, who are sharing the good news through words and deeds, welcoming the one whom brought persecution to the earliest followers as their teacher- these people, who share their belongings, seeing to the

needs of the poor, the widow, the afflicted - these people, who welcome both men and women as leaders - what do we call these people? Christians, followers of Christ. What a motley crew!

I don't read about needing to say certain words or perform specific acts to be a Christian. What was it that Frederick Buechner said? *It's by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that Jesus embodied that we live the Christian life.*

It's how we live. How we live into that final command, the new commandment of Jesus - to love one another - that's what shows we're living into the new life offered us as followers of Christ. That's what it means to be a Christian. It brings to mind another song, 'they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love....'

Out of the Cold is a ministry here in Centre County that provides shelter to persons without permanent homes, from October through May. It's 14 diverse congregations working together, feeding, providing safe lodging, conversation and a recognition of each person as valuable and deserving of love and accomodation. Out of the Cold isn't about defining beliefs. There's little talk of theology. Instead, it's an amazing coming together of the local Christian community to show our love for all peoples. 'Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love...'

So how do we reclaim this word, restore this word?

I had considered working with how we understand the bible as part of looking at Christian, but have chosen instead to work with that concept in a few weeks. But I want to bring in something Peter Enns says in his book *The Bible Tells Me So*. He said 'it's a bad move to invent a Jesus who agrees with us rather than challenges us.' (p 187)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Enns, Peter. 2014. *The Bible Tells Me So*. HarperOne.

As Christians, we are to be continually challenged by Jesus message. If we start to think we've got it all figured out, chances are we're missing the call of Christ. Those early followers of the Way earned the title Christians because they were living into a new way of life - welcoming men, women, Jew, Greek, to experience a Jesus who challenges the status quo, who calls us to find Life through the commandment of loving one another. Can we be those unruly people, deserving a new name, today, Christians who don't behave the way many expect Christians in our corner of the world to act?

Tien Tran, a Vietnamese Mennonite working for the UN talks about 'the way of the open palm'. He says the palm facing up is a non-threatening gesture, reminiscent of the pleading gesture of a beggar. It's also a reminder of God's open hands. He struggled in his work as he saw those in power who considered themselves Christian finding it easier to destroy than to build, to oppress than to be open to listening and seeking understanding. This is what I believe being a Christian means, he say: With open minds we welcome people. With open hearts we share their pain and suffering, and with open hands we work with them to bring peace.<sup>6</sup>

So we are challenged, as we live the way of life that Jesus embodied, and boldly reclaim our title as Christians. Doing and Being - that's the embodied life of a Christian. Not inventing a Jesus who agrees with us, but allow Jesus to challenge us to live the way of the open palm. We work on campaigns, we pray for those in need, we provide shelter for those without homes, we engage in uncomfortable conversations AND we remain unsettled, because Jesus was the great unsettler. Doing and Being. As a Christian, can we be known as ones who live the way of the open palm? May it be so. Amen

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<sup>6</sup> <http://thirdway.com/love-neighbour-open-palm/>