

Where Do You Draw the Line?

Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and the Lord, Christ Jesus. Amen.

The text for our message today is the first reading from the book of Acts, especially these words: “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 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. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ,

That's it! I've had enough! Here's where I draw the line! I know you've felt that way before. Maybe your child has pushed and pushed and pushed and it's got to stop. Or maybe there's something you cannot tolerate, be it having the television on during supper-time –bad enough it's on all day, or neighbors being loud into the late evening, or there's a mess in one of the rooms of the house that's gone too far, you've put up with something you don't like to a point, but this means you've got your limits. Here's where I draw the line.

And that can be good. Unfortunately, “drawing lines” has another meaning which is not so helpful –a social one. We tend to join into groups of favorite people whose company is welcome to us. But if some people are in our group, then other people are outside of our little group, and it is very hard, when you've drawn a line like that that other people feel, to be able to speak a criticism if it's needed, or to witness to your faith, or to even to be an effective fellow Christian, if that person you're dealing with has always felt like you thought they were second-class or second-tier in your world. You look at Jesus and you see he crossed all kinds of lines. The sinners, the prostitutes, the unwelcome were welcome to him. The only lines he drew were whether or not they were open to the Gospel.

Today's text is the story of evangelism at Antioch, the third-largest city in the Roman Empire of its day after Rome itself, and Alexandria –a very cosmopolitan place. The story of Antioch is the story of the growth of the Church. Here believers were first called “Christians.” Here was the first intensive missionary outreach to a city. Here Paul began his three great missionary journeys that brought Christ to the known world, being prepared and resourced and supported by the people of Antioch. Here, you might say, world evangelism got its start.

And what was so special about Antioch? These people didn't draw so many lines of in-groups and out-groups. The text says, “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 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. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” In the great city of Antioch, people were far more likely to rub shoulders with folks of other cultures, and to know them, and to be genuine friends with them. Here in Antioch the Christian faith made the jump from something believed by a small number of Jews only, to a faith and a Savior for all people in all parts of the world.

Of course, God opened the door for this. He gave Peter a vision that this was the right timing for this to happen. Paul had been waiting in Tarsus for seven or eight years after his conversion and after God had revealed to him that he should carry the Gospel to the Gentiles before Barnabas came knocking at his door, saying, “We’re going to Antioch, Paul. God’s got work for us to do.” Today, I believe God has opened another door for his church, two of them that I see, one in the worldwide and one here in America. Worldwide, Christianity is growing faster than at any time in its 2000 year history. It might not look like it in the U.S. and in Europe, because the number of faithful is not growing much here, but throughout the world the Gospel is winning people to salvation like never before. In China alone, if the growth of Christianity continues at its present pace, in 30 years there will be 300 million practicing Christians in China, or double the number there currently are in the United States. You can be a part of this great work of God through your prayers and through your mission offerings, and through direct action on your part. You see, there are currently 16,000 college students from other countries studying in Michigan alone, a great many right over at CMU. Over half of them are from the 200 countries of the world that don’t allow missionaries into them, like China and Middle Eastern countries, and others, and the great majority of these students will be going back home again when they are done as some of the best and brightest scholars and leaders of the world. Of these students, 80% of them have no Christian friends. While they are here, 70% will never have a family meal in an American home. If your child becomes friendly with one, why not invite them over, and to church? Why not speak of what’s important to you in your family life? Why not invite some of these students to your place for a weekend for a taste of American life? You might be surprised that they are interested to hear about your faith in your God in a way that many Americans might not be. I still remember the international students we invited to our Advent pot-luck one year, and to the service after, one of whom had never been to church before, but said she would again.

You see, evangelism is not just something that happens “out there” somewhere. There are plenty of people all around each of us that God wants to reach. As I look at this text today, the point I see is that how effective you will be for the Lord in witness depends largely on where you draw the line in terms of who is part of your group and who is not. This is true regarding other kinds of people, or people much like you whom you don’t happen to know. There is nothing so isolating to a new person as people laughing and friendly in a church narthex, but having to walk by because they know they’re not included in that group. Meanwhile the ones with the friends go on thinking, “We have a very friendly church,” because they have that experience. They have friends there! Why did this work of God happen in Antioch and not in Jerusalem where all the apostles were? Because it was a different atmosphere in Antioch. Folks intentionally pushed the line out to include others. God wants you to create that different atmosphere like Jesus did. He wants you to draw lines that include other people, to extend the boundaries of who’s welcome in your circle, even those you’ve never met.

As I drive around I see fields of corn sprouting. What would you think of a farmer who worked the ground and pulled the drill but didn't plant any seed, then prayed for God to bless the harvest? You'd say he was pretty foolish. What would you say of a person who prayed for God to bless his church, but never planted any seed, never witnessed to Christ, nor spoke a word of invitation to anyone? Just as foolish, right? And yet it happens all the time.

Jesus said you're the seed. He said, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Have you ever bitten into an apple core and gotten one of the seeds caught in your teeth? Hard to believe that that little seed caught in your teeth could one day sprout into an entire tree full of apples, each of which has seeds that could multiply into many other trees. What potential in that one seed! And that's how God sees you. He's saying that if you loose your life to the Lord, so that it's not your own anymore, you'll get to keep it for eternity, for one thing. You lose your life because you know you have one so much better –eternal life in the hand of the almighty Creator, who loved you and washing you clean from all sin through Jesus Christ, and who claims you as his. You have experienced his grace. And if you lose your life for the Lord, as his follower, then God will work through you to touch others. This is not optional for a Christian. Jesus followed these words up by saying, "Where I am, my servant also will be." The only question is: Are you his servant? If so, you have the potential, too. The seed that falls from the wagon and ends up on the barn floor molders and rots and comes to nothing, but the one that's planted and gives its life produces many seeds, and the life that says, "Lord I'm yours. What do you want me to do?" will too.

At Antioch some of the believers told the good news of Jesus to people who were not like them, but friends anyway, and many believed. The church in Jerusalem sent a good man, filled with the Holy Spirit, named Barnabas to them, who brought along Saul or Paul, and together they taught people about the basics of the faith for a year. And these disciples were first called "Christians" in Antioch. There is some evidence that the name Christian was not very polite when it was first thought up. It simply means "belonging to Christ," but probably was first meant to caricature Christians, although they ended up using it anyway, as if they said, "So what? I belong to Christ, and I'll admit it. I'm not ashamed to bear that name. Call me a Christian."

Earlier in this sermon I talked about a second door that God was opening, and one closer to home. I'm talking about that movie, "The Da Vinci Code" that opened in theaters this weekend. Now it's a horrible movie from the standpoint of the truth and what it tries to convince people of. It also tries to caricature Christianity. In fact, some have called it the worst literary attack on Christianity since the third century. Some 45 million people have read the book, and more will probably see this movie than read the book. It intends to say that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and that he was just a man who had descendants, and that suppressed documents from early centuries show this, and that Jesus wasn't considered God until much later, after Constantine picked the books of the New Testament. It's all garbage, as far as what it says. Not a single scholar that I've heard of will back this stuff up, which is amazing, because you can usually find some cooky professor somewhere to agree with most anything, yet this book is sure obviously unhistorical that no one with credibility will back it up. It is pure sensationalism, and yet

a third of all Canadians who have read the book believe that Jesus has descendants walking around on the earth somewhere. The truth is, the documents that the Da Vinci Code was based on were written in the third century, way after the books of the Bible, by some weird sect. Constantine never chose the books of the Bible. The early church fully believed Jesus was God from the start, and had a harder time dealing with him being fully man. The book is fiction, but claims to present facts even though there is not one reputable scholar anywhere in the world who will endorse it. And yet it's got people interested.

Here's the exciting part, though. What if this book gets people talking, who wouldn't normally be talking about these topics? Its popularity shows that people are highly interested in Jesus, doesn't it? And what if you knew what to say to them? Just think, in the next week or two weeks you could ask a person you knew who saw this show, "Hey, what did you think of that movie?" and BAM! you'll be talking about Jesus to someone you wouldn't normally be having that conversation with. Why, the people in Antioch would be so proud! Sadly, you would have to see the movie or read the book to have credibility, and I was hoping to avoid that, and to avoid giving money to them. Promise me this, though, if you do, go to that web site I noted for you in the church bulletin, or order the book by Paul Maier about this, so that you'll know how to express what you think of it, when you get to talking. In this way, the people of God, you and I, could be involved in changing the culture in our own way, right around here. Imagine if every one of us had just one conversation with somebody who saw that movie, somebody who otherwise might not have talked to you about what you believe and why. Imagine this movie becoming one of the greatest witnessing tools for Christ.

Some years ago the freedom of information act released an actual radio conversation between a United States aircraft carrier and Canadian authorities, that went like this:

Canadians: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Americans: Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.

Canadians: Negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Americans: This is the captain of a US navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

Canadians: No, I say again, you divert YOUR course.

Americans: **THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS LINCOLN, THE SECOND LARGEST SHIP IN THE UNITED STATES ATLANTIC FLEET. WE ARE ACCOMPANIED BY THREE DESTROYERS, THREE CRUISERS, AND NUMEROUS SUPPORT VESSELS. I DEMAND THAT YOU CHANGE YOUR COURSE 15 DEGREES NORTH... I SAY AGAIN... THAT'S ONE-FIVE DEGREES NORTH... OR COUNTER-MEASURES WILL BE UNDERTAKEN TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF THIS SHIP!!**

Canadians: This is a lighthouse. [Divert your course]

You may think that with the direction our society is going in, what's the point of trying to stop it. It's got all Hollywood behind it. But you know what? God's not moving, no matter how strong the forces commanded against him and his kingdom, and

when you stand with the Lord and his truth, you will not be moved either, but rather will be able to be used by God with the potential to reach others. Amen.