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Acts 11:19-26
Who Is Your Gentile?
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After the church in Jerusalem began to be persecuted, all of its members except the apostles scattered to neighboring areas. But as they traveled, the church members discovered the risen and ascended Jesus Christ was already at work in all of these surrounding areas. Soon word came to the apostles back in Jerusalem that many in the city of Antioch had come to believe in Jesus.

Antioch was a multicultural port city hundreds of miles to the north of Jerusalem. After Rome and Alexandria, it was the third leading city of the Roman Empire. It had a half million citizens which included Syrians, Romans, Persians, Indians, and even Chinese. In other words, it had a lot of Gentiles.

When the Jewish apostles in Jerusalem heard that a Gentile church was forming in Antioch, they had to decide how to respond. We can imagine them huddled together trying to figure this out. "There are Gentiles joining our church! What will become of our traditions? What will change?"

It is fascinating that nobody calls himself or herself a Gentile. There is no Gentile support group, or League of Gentiles. The term was simply used by the earliest church, which was Jewish, to designate those who were not Jewish. But to this day, we all have someone in our lives who does not belong to our tribe, who is different, and whom we do not understand. Maybe your Gentile is the new son-in-law, new colleague or student, the strange accent you hear when you call customer service, or the visitor who is sitting in your favorite pew at church. There's always a Gentile.

In the Barnes' home the Gentile is a new puppy. Everyone is excited to have this puppy except for the 16-year-old Golden Retriever. The puppy doesn't know the family traditions for how dogs are expected to act, and it drives the old dog nuts. On a typical day the puppy will charge across the room, jump spread eagle in the air and land on the old dog's head. He doesn't respond, but just turns toward us with a look of betrayal that asks, "How could you do this to me?"

Maybe that is what the apostles once asked of God. "How could you do this to your good Jewish church?" But if it were, they got the question out of their system. Peter had already told the other apostles about his experiences with Cornelius, the Roman Centurion who had met God before he met Peter. And he told them about the others Gentiles in Caesarea who also had been converted. Just before our text, the apostles claimed, "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." So when they heard about Gentiles forming a church in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to go and greet these newest brothers and sisters in the faith. When Barnabas arrived, we are told, "He saw the grace of God and rejoiced."

Grace is anything that comes into our lives as God's initiative. It is not what we do for ourselves but what only God can do for us. Sometimes grace is gentle, forgiving, healing, and comforting. At other times grace is disruptive and interrupts our own plans. But always grace is a gift that draws us to God, and thus back to life. Here's the point today: often grace shows up beyond the margins.

We have learned to construct life as carefully as we can. If you are a person of faith, then a central part of this construction is a place you go to encounter the grace of God—possibly the church, your family, your friends, or your favorite authors. These are people you know and trust, who are like you, who speak your language, and share your traditions. This is all good and helpful, but in the very process of surrounding yourself with familiar faces, you inevitably create margins and Gentiles to your life. Then the question you face is the same as Barnabas and the apostles in Jerusalem: What will you do when the grace of God shows up beyond the margins?

Barnabas saw the grace of God among the Gentiles and rejoiced because as the text says, "He was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith." To be a good man or woman is to give up trying to contain life and to rejoice at the opportunities to expand it.

Those are the options. Either we can try to contain life or we can have the faith to expand it. Those who make containment their goal just want to hold on to what they have. "I've got my life just the way I want it. Now, nobody move." They try to contain their relationships, workplaces, money, politics, community, even their understanding of God, as if they could hold life in a box. But to try and contain life is to destine yourself to a life of anxiety because something is always slipping out of the box. And, thus, fear is their constant companion. The alternative is to use your fleeting years always to seek the expansion of life. To expand life is to pay attention to the grace of God who is at work beyond the margins. Since this is your Creator, to be drawn to him is to be drawn into more life.

Maybe we could all stand to have a puppy jump on us from time to time. The new son-in-law isn't trying to drive you crazy. He's just different than you. The new colleague or student may bring God's gifts into your life, gifts you didn't know you needed. The new languages you keep hearing may remind you that it is time to pay more attention to the world. The new philosophies, scientific discoveries, and postmodern ideologies don't need to be feared. God can be at work in anything.

Those who seek to expand life don't say yes to everything, but they do look for the grace of God in anything. And when they find it, they rejoice. So if fear is the constant companion of the containers, joy is the companion of the expanders. They are just delighted by the grace that keeps showing up in the strangest places.

Our text tells us that it was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians. It is as if to say we don't get the name Christian unless we are looking for grace beyond the margins. That is just what we do. We take the Gentiles in our midst very seriously. So seriously that we believe God is with them. And that makes them, now us.

Apparently the name Christian took a while to catch on in the Early Church. It is only used two other times in the New Testament and one of those was with derision by King Agrippa. More often the new church was called the Way, or just the community. As soon as Christian became the designation of our religion, we immediately were in danger of not being Christ-ian with a constant temptation to contain grace.

Many years ago I was leading a church group on a mission trip to the West Bank. We spent some time at a Catholic school which was directed by a Palestinian priest. Over half of the students were Muslim for the simple reason that this was the best school in town. As he walked us through the halls, the priest told us about the required religion classes and chapels in which all of the students participated. "They love to receive the sacrament," he told us. One of the members of our group became perplexed and said, "I thought it was dangerous for Muslims to become Christian. Aren't the parents of the Muslim children upset about what you are doing?" The priest got a look of horror on his face and replied, "Oh, no. I don't want the Muslim children to become Christian. I just want them to know that Jesus died for their sins, that they are forgiven, and loved by God. I want them to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to receive the means of grace. But I would never want them to be Christian."

Well, there we have it. Grace beyond the margins. But doesn't it help to know that some Muslim children are growing up to believe that Christians are gracious? And wouldn't it help if your Gentiles thought the same thing about Christianity because of you?

There is a fascinating epilogue to our text today. We are told that when word came of a famine in the land, the new church in Antioch took up a collection of money to send to the church in Jerusalem. When the apostles sent Barnabas to Antioch, they thought they were extending grace. As it turned out, they were receiving grace. That's the way it works—the grace you give is always the grace you receive. Amen.