

“A Peculiar People”

Acts 11:19-26

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=acts+11:19-26

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Several years ago, I chased an intruder away from my house. That’s right. I chased away an intruder. Me. And I did it using nothing but a can of bug spray.

My intruder was what they call a cicada killer wasp. Have you ever seen one? (*show pictures*) They can be anywhere from 1 to 2 ½ inches long. They are glossy black with sleek, yellow stripes around their abdomen and they dig burrows in soft dirt where they store their kill. I had never seen one of these wasps and when you notice an insect about the size of your thumb digging around in your flower bed – well, I don’t have to tell you, it’s a bit alarming.

So, I panicked. I ran back to my garage, grabbed a spray can of wasp killer, ran back to where the cicada killer was digging around and fired a thin stream of toxic fluid at the intruder. I missed and it flew away.

Later I did some research to find out just what I had attacked. And when I learned about the cicada killer, I regretted my rash and fearful action. I found out that despite their ferocious appearance, they are quite docile and that they hunt specifically for the loud annoying cicadas that wail away during the summer. In other words, I had chased away a helpful predator because of fear, because it was unlike anything I had ever seen before... I had chased it away because it was different.

It’s human nature really; to be afraid of the things that are different. Being different has gotten a lot of people in trouble, especially those who were a part of the early church. When we read about them in **Acts 11:19-26** (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=acts+11:19-26), we see that they have been chased away from their homes like unwanted wasps because their beliefs and their gatherings were different.

Peculiar people struggle because they are different

They followed a controversial Messiah who was martyred on a scandalous cross and then raised from the dead. They claimed this Messiah was their true Lord, not Caesar. They celebrated odd ceremonies and they wouldn’t keep their private religion to themselves.

So, their detractors dragged them from their homes, imprisoned them and chased them to the far reaches of the Empire; places like Phoenecia, Cyprus and Antioch.

Now, it’s important to remember that these early believers still saw themselves as Jews. They observed the Sabbath, went to synagogue, prayed, and even followed the dietary regulations.

So when these believers fled from widespread persecution in Jerusalem, they sought out other Jews. This was their refuge and their safe place.

We see this kind of behavior even today. Immigrants move to the United States from all over the globe and oftentimes they move to the places where their people are. They look for people who look, talk, behave and believe like them.

And this isn’t solely a behavior for immigrants. We see this even among those who have lived in America all their lives. When looking for a place to live, we pay close attention to the neighborhood and whether or not the people share our same values. We note the businesses around the corner, and the language of nearby billboards.

We find safety and comfort with people who are like us, and for people who are feeling insecure, like the early church, this is necessary for survival. But, the text says,... “among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene...” That’s trouble...these men were different.

Peculiar People do strange things

Cyprus was an island (*show map*), and you know how “island people” are. They’re separated from the mainland, they’re isolated from the mainstream culture. They tend to be odd kind of people. I can say this because my mother is from Puerto Rico and I know that people from that island have passions that run as hot as the tropical sun. They also tend to be quite adventurous, always wondering what other worlds are out there.

And Cyrene, well that’s a Greek colony all the way over in Africa. They were an adventurous bunch, and probably a lot more “progressive” than the Jews from Jerusalem. They too were a little odd.

Now, strange people, individuals who tend to go against the grain can sometimes be driven into isolation. They revel and take pride in the fact that they are different, thinking they’re special or superior to others. They might even be put-off by anyone who is not different like them.

But these men didn’t do this. They didn’t develop a secret handshake or code word. They didn’t use persecution as an excuse for stock-piling weapons and forming their own militia group. And they didn’t establish a commune in the jungle either.

No, these guys went to the city of Antioch, a place where racial tensions towards Jews had been high, and they started talking. Not to the Jews, mind you, they started talking to the Greeks; people who could hurt them and persecute them. Strange right?

Their oddness, their peculiarity compelled them to share the Good News of the Gospel. Their oddness led them to talk. It’s like Flannery O’Connor says, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.” The good news of Jesus makes you do strange things. And the good news of Jesus lets you see strange things as well, because it says that a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.

Last year on the Saturday before Easter, I sat next to my son Danny on the couch to say our prayers before going to bed. And because Danny doesn’t feel confident enough to pray on his own, we sometimes have him repeat the simple phrases we say aloud. So, we say, “Dear God” (he repeats), “Thank you for this day” (he repeats), “Thank you for your son Jesus” (repeat), “and for giving us eternal life.” Now, this term, was just a little too complex for him and so he adjusted it to make it fit his own vocabulary. “Thank you for giving us a turn of life,” he said. *A turn of life.*

Yes, that’s what Jesus did for us. We were heading this way, the way everyone was telling us to go, and now, because of his life, death and resurrection, we are now heading a different direction.

Jesus has given us “a turn of life” but if we continue on this path, we will be perceived as different, noticeably different. People will start talking and we will start talking to different people and who knows, it may be that they will have a “turn of life” as well.

So, here we have these peculiar people touching off a peculiar series of events, and the mother church in Jerusalem starts noticing, and so they send someone who was sensitive and discerning. They sent Barnabas.

Peculiar People attract strange people

Barnabas was different too. Barnabas was a good man, a man full of the Holy Spirit and a man of faith. And after watching the church at Antioch for a while, he was convinced.

The grace of God was clearly here in Antioch. He saw this. He rejoiced in this. And so he became a cheerleader for the believers in Antioch, telling them to keep doing what they’re doing. And more people came to faith.

And so, Barnabas went to the far away city of Tarsus, to find an even stranger man: Saul. Saul, whose name had not yet been changed to Paul. Saul, the former Pharisee who at one time had sought to imprison other Jesus followers but now was the church’s loudest and most controversial apostle. Saul had a history of chatting with and enraging Greeks and other Gentiles. Saul was perfect. He was the perfect selection! Saul ended up staying with them for a year, teaching and instructing the growing church in Antioch.

Peculiar People are tough to identify

What began as a movement among Jews and then spread to the Greeks became something that the residents of Antioch had never seen before.

This was a city known for its ethnic strife and race riots. It was a crowded city “filled with hatred and fear.” (“United by Faith” by Michael Emerson). But the church at Antioch didn’t look like this. It wasn’t a club for Jews. No, it was a place for Jews... and Gentiles to worship and eat together; and they were led by a diverse leadership team that reflected the multi-cultural nature of the growing church.

People didn’t know what to call them. They were a peculiar kind of people, unlike any gathering they had ever encountered. They weren’t a social group or an ethnic group. They weren’t pagan or Jew. They couldn’t find a common language, color of skin, or nation of origin. So, people called them Christians – Christ followers.

In 1945 a Cleveland newspaper sponsored a contest to name their latest professional sports franchise. The overwhelming favorite wasn’t a jungle cat, bird of prey, North American mammal or warrior figure. No, the most suggested team name was the name of their new team’s coach, the legendary and beloved Paul Brown. And so, Cleveland’s new professional football team became the Cleveland Browns, an unusual, simple name. But perhaps there is no other name more honoring than this one.

This church is called Chilson Hills Church, a name that is frequently misspelled, mispronounced and mistaken for “chosen” or “chills and hills.” It’s the name of this hilly, swampy spot by the banks of Chilson Creek near Chilson Rd.

But does that name embody who you are? It may indicate the region that surrounds you and your ministry area. But is that who you are?

Is the identity of Chilson Hills Church found in its building, this structure you have practically built with your own hands? This building tells a mighty story; it begins with the chapel on the far end, extends to this worship space and then goes beyond this wall into the memorial garden. Is this building who you are?

Yes it’s true. This building sits on a 12 acre lot called Chilson Hills, but you come from Brighton, Howell and Pinkney. And your ministry extends even beyond those communities. You worship, interact and serve in this building, but you are not contained within this building. You, my brothers and sisters, are a church, a network of people who are joined by a common Savior, Jesus Christ.

But you’re not just any church. You’re not content to meet on Sunday mornings and go through the ceremonial motions, and then lock your doors until the next time you gather.

No, you house the homeless in your basement. You consider the input of your lay people to be just as significant and formative as your paid staff. You have yoga classes, events like Green Expos, a ministry for adults with special needs called Zechariah’s Way and you have ecumenical gatherings with Presbyterians and Methodists. You encourage open dialogue regarding controversial issues. You anoint people with oil, you partake of the Lord’s Supper on a weekly basis and you sing contemporary and ancient songs with gusto and heart.

You, brothers and sisters, are a church yes, but you’re a different kind of church. You... are peculiar. And I hope you take that as a compliment because it’s what I have come to admire about you. But the challenge for you as a congregation is maintaining your “oddness” your “different” nature, and thriving in this increasingly post-Christian culture without becoming insulated and closed off. You must remember the reason for your strangeness.

Peculiar People must persist in praying to remain peculiar

I read a quote by Lady Gaga, the pop superstar who is known for her wild performances and her loud, over-the-top wardrobe. She said that she “used to pray every night that God would make (her) crazy...” that he would instill in her a creativity and a strangeness that all of those people that she loved and respected had.

I have to say, that I want to laugh at what Lady Gaga says, because I find her oddness to be off-putting and ... well... yucky. But, I think she's got a point. The most inspiring artists and artisans, the most compelling leaders, scientists and thinkers and... churches (like Antioch) were perceived as a bit crazy.

Perhaps we should pray to be like them. Perhaps we should pray that we may not tire in our pursuit to be different from our surrounding culture. That we might not keep this oddness to ourselves but instead tell others about this weird and life-changing Messiah we follow; that we might be as Paul says, "fools for the sake of Christ." (**1 Cor. 4:10**) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+4:10) May we pray for the courage to be an odd, strange... peculiar church of Christ followers.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS
For Sunday, October 31, 2010's Sermon
Foundational Scripture: Acts 11:19-26 (NRSV)

Featured Scripture Reflection: "A Peculiar People" (Acts 11:19-26 NRSV)

Opening Icebreaker: Share one or two things you do or enjoy which might not be considered normal
(Example: "I love the smell of play-dough" or, "I wear sandals in the snow")

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- How was the persecution of the early church a blessing and a curse?
- What compelled some of the early believers to "proclaim" the Lord Jesus and what compelled others to only speak of it to the Jews?
- Why did the church in Jerusalem send Barnabas to observe the situation in Antioch? When the text says that Barnabas "saw the grace of God," what tangible things do you think he observed?
- Why do you think Barnabas selected Saul to help lead the fledgling congregation in Antioch?

How is your life touched?

- Have you ever been treated poorly because you behaved contrary to generally accepted principles or expectations?
- What risks does one face if they choose to "proclaim" or "tell the good news"?
- What do you think of Flannery O'Connor's quote (based on John 8:32): "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd."
- In general, what do you think an unchurched person thinks of when they hear the term "Christian"? What characteristics run through their mind? The following text tells how the name "Christian" first came about. With this account in mind, what *should* the word "Christian" bring to mind?

What is God's invitation to you?

- How do you live differently from those around you? What difference does it make to others? Does your faith compel you to greater isolation or "greater invitation"?
- What makes Chilson Hills Church unique or different? How do you speak of this congregation to others? Would you feel comfortable inviting others to be a part of this congregation? Why or Why not.

What can you pray for?

- Pray that we would live "peculiar" lives of faith and that our congregation would be fearless in proclaiming our "peculiar" faith to others through daily, ordinary attempts.