

Rev. Luke C. Werre
Peace, Sun Prairie
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Easter 6 (Walking Together)

Acts 11:19-26

CHRISTIANS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT CHRIST'S COMMISSION

It was the year 1849. In the parish hall of Grace church, a cathedral-like building which still stands in downtown Milwaukee, 4 Lutheran pastors, relatively new to America, met to discuss the formation of a church body which would one day be called the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Their purposes were not political, commercial, or merely humanitarian. They and the congregations they served were teaming together for 4 purposes:

- First, to provide a reliable system for training dependable, doctrinally faithful pastors and teachers.
- Secondly, to better enable them to send out missionaries to other parts of the world on their behalf.
- Thirdly, to promote and encourage each other to stay in the true doctrine and in the true practice of our Christian faith.
- Fourthly, to produce reliable, biblically-based written materials –text books, hymn books, etc. –to use in their churches.

In other words, their concern was to carry out our Savior's Great Commission. When Christ ascended into heaven He parted with the words, "Go and make disciples of all nations." That's Christ's Great Commission. As believers, that has been our purpose for being here on earth ever since –to make disciples for Christ. Already in its first century of existence we see that driving concern in the Christian Church from Acts, chapter 11 today. As we are mindful of the blessings of being part of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, let's focus for a few minutes in this truth:
Christians are concerned about Christ's commission.

Perhaps the most stunning thing in this reading from Acts 11 is the simple fact that the Christians were concerned about making disciples for Christ. To appreciate this, let's recall what was going on. The number of believers in Jerusalem had swelled into the thousands. The Church experienced some growing pains. They had to reorganize how they distributed charitable gifts to widows in order to free up the apostles for full-time preaching and teaching. They had to deal with the doctrinal question of whether Gentiles could be saved too. They were also met with hot opposition from society. In fact, an outstanding Christian named Stephen was pummeled to death with rocks by an angry mob because he preached so effectively about Jesus Christ.

Stephen's bloody death sparked a general persecution against all the Christians citywide. Christians were thrown in jail. Christians were escorted out of the city and forbidden to return. Christians' homes and businesses were confiscated. It wasn't safe for Christians to walk around alone. You could be beaten and bloodied and the police would look the other way. Anti-religious organizations funded lawyers to keep appealing to the courts to take away Christians' rights. That was Jerusalem. Yet in spite of it all we are told in Acts 11, "*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.*"

Isn't that amazing? Whenever you and I have moved under much tamer circumstances, we might wonder about a school for our kids, how much property tax will be, how far away the grocery store is – but do we anticipate what opportunities there might be to share the news about Jesus with people? Is that our concern?

And when the church in Antioch began to win converts we are told, "*News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.*" Isn't that remarkable? We'd all probably understand if the Christians in Jerusalem had said, "I

can't bother about what's going on in Antioch. I have enough pressure here." But in spite of the pressure on them the church in Jerusalem was aware of the Gospel's success in Antioch. They were interested. They cared. They were concerned enough that, in spite of their own problems, they funded Barnabas as a missionary to assist in the development of the church in Antioch, to teach them and encourage them in the true doctrine. And later, Barnabas got the apostle Paul to help him. They preached and taught and did outreach.

Their example makes quite an impression how Christians are concerned about Christ's commission. In a way, it really puts you and me to shame, even though we are Christians too. Granted, so often you and I are desperately struggling just to survive the day. But there's something else. At times there's an unconcern in us for believers in foreign missions, a disinterest in what we decide to do together as a synod, an unawareness of what's happening in our own congregation outside our own little circle of activity, a conspicuous silence about Jesus within our own homes, and even a resentment in our hearts when we're told that we ought care more and be more involved. Our hearts are really spoiled by sin, aren't they? That's something God won't excuse, especially if we want to continue that way. Don't imagine that things will be fine with God if our hearts remain unchanged. The problem is, so often even if we try to care more, we often find we can't.

We have no hope but to turn to Christ for mercy because of our sinful hearts. By His sufferings and death on the cross He was punished for us and you and I are pardoned. Let's be assured today through His own Words and His own Sacrament that we are in fact forgiven, and saved from God's anger. Let's be assured that God loves us to no end. Let's share that love. Christ has saved our lives. We owe Christ our lives. We give back to Christ our lives. That's how Christ has chosen to bring eternal salvation to the world—through the human agency of the believers of His Church.

In the Gospel Lesson today Jesus commanded us, "Love each other as I have loved you." His Great Commission is to go and make disciples of all nations. Those two things are mighty hard for an

individual believer to do alone without being involved in a congregation. Impossible really. Those two things are hard for an individual congregation to do without being involved in a larger church body.

Let's not think that Peace Lutheran Church is a franchise of the WELS as though we get our marching orders from the headquarters in Milwaukee. That perception is backwards. Let's also not imagine that belonging to the WELS is commanded anywhere in the Bible. We are a group of congregations who have chosen to be affiliated with each other because of our common concern for Christ's commission. We have organized to carry out that commission in the best way we can in spite of our own human frailties and imperfections. We are walking together. That's what the word "synod" means.

Christians care about Christ's commission. That's why the WELS was formed. That's why we need to pray for her, support her, and be concerned about her message and her activities, and as long as God keeps her true to the Bible, be loyal to her and thank God for her.