

Sermon for October 14, 2018
58th Anniversary of Aldersgate
“Antioch and Aldersgate”

Acts 11:19-29, 13:1-3

The church in Antioch is important in the development of the early church. It was there that followers of Jesus were first called “Christians.” At the time we were called followers of “The Way.”(Acts 9:2) We could have ended up being called Waysist or Jesusians. So am glad the name “Christian” stuck.

I also think that this particular early congregation epitomized what it means to be Christian. Many aspects of what we think the church should be and what we should be and members of the church found expression in Antioch. They weren’t Christian in name only. They truly embodied what we think of as Christian.

I think Aldersgate reflects Antioch in many ways. I believe that like Antioch, Aldersgate lives out what it means to be Christian. Let me show you what I mean.

Antioch was a church full of grace and on fire for the Lord. After the martyrdom of Stephen, the disciples in Jerusalem were scattered. As they scattered they took the gospel with them to the new places to which they went including Antioch. These disciples apparently included Simon of Cyrene, the Jewish African who had carried Jesus’ cross. They started sharing the Gospel with Greeks there and many came to believe. In Jerusalem they heard of this and sent Barnabas to help disciple them and lead that church. When he arrived Barnabas found a church that was full of the Holy Spirit.

I don’t think it was an accident that Aldersgate got the name it did. In the early days the name was going to be Boulevard Methodist because they were looking for place on Wade Hampton Boulevard. It was changed to Morningside for the Morningside community, but there was already a Morningside Baptist. So finally the name Aldersgate was chosen. For us Methodists Aldersgate was the place where John Wesley’s heart was strangely warmed. One evening at a Moravian Meeting House on Aldersgate St. in London as the preface to Luther’s Commentary on Romans was being read, John Wesley reported that his heart was warmed and he knew that God truly loved him.

Like the church in Antioch the Holy Spirit has been warming hearts at Aldersgate. For 58 years people’s lives have been changed. Just listen to the young people effected by our ministries like the interns who have served at United Ministries! Think of the people who have gone forth from here to serve elsewhere. Like Barnabas arriving in Antioch, I was sent here and found a church that is full of the Holy Spirit!

Another important first for Antioch is that it was the first Church to embrace Paul. If you remember Paul, also called by his Jewish name Saul, had persecuted the church in his early years. As he was headed to Damascus, to arrest the believers there, Jesus stopped him on the road and blinded him. After a few days of blindness, a believer came to him at the Lord’s direction, and healed his vision. Then Paul could see – not just with his eyes, but he could see with his heart that Jesus is the Son of God. Paul soon began arguing with his fellow Pharisees that Jesus was the Messiah, but most of the believers still didn’t trust him. Yet the church in Antioch took him in and he helped Barnabas minister with them.

As I read about that, I thought of Aldersgate’s hospitality. I know when I came here over three years ago you were engaged in an effort to learn biblical hospitality. You have been applying those lessons to your life together. I have seen this church reach out to people of all kinds. You have truly sought to be a welcoming church.

But your hospitality has not stopped at the doors of the church. In a spirit of hospitality you have reached out into the community. You have handed out water bottles in the street. You have reached out to the school to minister to the students there. You have opened your doors to former refugees living in your community, and welcomed them in even though some of them do not share your faith. And you have opened your doors to Mosaic, an after school ESL program for children in our community trying to learn English.

Another significant first for Antioch is that it was the site of the first recorded intentional relief effort. A prophet had told them that there would be a famine. So the church in Antioch took up a collection to help relieve the suffering. Up to this point we hear of the churches caring for those in need in their own congregation, but this goes beyond that.

In the past Aldersgate has sent out work teams at times of disaster. And recently we have made Flood Buckets and health kits and gave them to UMCOR. In the same vain we have tried to provide relief for those in need here in our community. Through support of United Ministries and Triune Mercy Center and Habitat for Humanity this church has shared the love of God in so many ways.

A final significant first for Antioch is that it has the first recorded intentional missionary effort. If you read through the book of Acts you can see that the Gospel was spread, but mostly because of persecution. Someone would start persecuting the Christians, then they would scatter and take the Gospel to their new homes. But the Holy Spirit moved Antioch to lay their hands on Paul and Barnabas and send them out to spread the gospel on purpose. It is interesting to note that one of the people that laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas was Black Simon, aka Simon of Cyrene, who had carried the cross for Jesus! And they took the gospel to some places it had never gone.

Aldersgate has embraced its role as a mission church. As your pastor I have been blessed to lay my hands on teams going to the Red Bird Mission and on United Ministry Interns. You have supported not just with money, but with prayers, The Datwyler's in Ecuador for many years. The fact that the Attaway's heard their call at this church to go into mission is significant. And the church sent them forth to minister in Thailand and continues to support them in their work with the Mission Society now. All that is on top of a renewed commitment to support missions through our apportionments.

Of course no church is perfect. My Dad always said, "If God had intended the church to be perfect, he wouldn't have included people." Like any church Aldersgate has its flaws. But I believe we have striven to live into the name first used in Antioch: "Christian." Through hospitality and love of our neighbor, both here and around the world, Aldersgate has tried to be what the word Christian means. In sign Language the sign for Christian is literally "Christ person." We are followers of Jesus Christ and we try to live into that identity in everything we do.

We always have room to grow. Yes, we can celebrate the past and all that this church has done, but let's not forget to be in the present and strive towards the future. Let's allow the Holy Spirit to inspire us, like it did the Christians in Antioch, and allow the Spirit to warm our hearts as it did John Wesley's. Let's be intentional in our outreach and mission.

There are a lot of lonely people out there. They need the fellowship and love and grace and warmth that we know as part of vital church family. They need that family too! This community is full of people who need Jesus, who need healing, who need their hearts warmed, who need their eyes opened, and who need their souls and lives liberated. Yes, Aldersgate is a great church with a short but wonderful history. Let's not rest on our laurels! Let's seek to minister to the world in Jesus name.

Then when people look at us their will say, as the people of Antioch did, "Those are Christians."