

Acts 11:19-26

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[0 : 0 0] I want to wish Happy Mother's Day to the mothers amongst us and the people who are motherly figures in our lives. I want to celebrate you, your work and sacrifice to make all of us grow into the people we are.

We all are who we are, in large part because of who our mothers were or are. And our text this morning is all about growing. It's about how faith grows.

So if you are here this morning and you want to grow in your faith, this is the perfect passage for you. If you think this morning your life is a spiritual desert, and someone has said that to me once of this congregation, Acts 11 shows us what God can do in the absolute harshest of conditions.

Acts 11 shows how the gospel can grow against all odds, how churches can grow despite countless challenges, how people can grow in our knowledge and love of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Growth is possible because the Lord is upon us. His hand is with us. We are gripped by his grace. And he's at work here.

[1 : 2 3] And we uniquely know that he is at work here because there's a new branch in the church of Christ that has just grown out of us.

Right now, eight kilometers east of here, King's Cross Church is gathering for the first time on a Sunday morning as a community to worship the Lord and proclaim his gospel.

A team from St. John's, many of whom grew up here and were nurtured here and have been equipped, empowered, and now sent out to the ends of the earth. And we are extending the gospel and the kingdom of God.

Jesus' plan to share his gospel globally is being fulfilled right now. And we get to participate. We see how Jesus works in the world in Acts 11, which fittingly is the story of the very first church plant.

It was an excellent choice for this morning. This text is a prototype that describes how God, through his gospel of grace, grips people, how he empowers them by his Holy Spirit, and then sends them out to proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord.

[2 : 3 8] And as we look at how faith grows in the first church plant in Acts 11, I'm going to use the metaphor of a plant, focusing first on the soil where the church was planted, then at the sowers who planted it, the seed they used, the gardener who cultivated the plant, the fertilizer, and finally the fruit.

Soil, sowers, seed, gardener, fertilizer, fruit. Six things that describe for us the first church plant, and also prescribe how all of us can grow in our faith, and our obedience to Jesus.

So first, let's look at the context of the first church plant in verse 19. This is a survey of the soil in Antioch, where the gospel was planted.

Antioch is not dissimilar to our city, to our context. Antioch was a strategic city of half a million people, north of Jerusalem in the Roman Empire, where Asia and Africa and Europe intersect.

It was a global gateway city of diversity and plurality and wealth. It was a place where different cultures and worldviews came together. Jewish, Greek, Roman, Asian, African.

[4 : 01] It was a central city of commerce, a center for global trade and immigration. I think if archaeologists uncovered an ancient ice rink in Antioch, I imagine the home team would have worn blue and green and white, and they would never have played past April.

That's the context. The soil where the church was planted. And what caused Christianity to come to Antioch was violent persecution in Jerusalem.

Christianity originally in the ancient world was seen as a weed, an unwanted pest growing and getting in the way of both the Jewish faith and Roman society.

In the first century after Jesus' resurrection, we see countless attempts to uproot Christian communities, to destroy Christians and their faith, and to stop the growth of the gospel.

The first Christian martyr named Stephen was stoned to death by the Jewish authorities in Acts chapter 7. And this persecution caused Christians to flee for their lives out of Jerusalem, scattering out in every direction and never looking back.

[5 : 14] God throughout history has used persecution to spur his church to go out into the world. This is the soil, the context, for the church in Antioch.

And it's our context as well. In our own story as a church, persecution for allegiance to Christ and his world has forced us out as well.

And now because of this, the gospel moves through us to new places and people. Persecution is the context for the first church plant, and it's also the context for us.

Christians flee Jerusalem, and some of them running for their lives come to Antioch. Second, the sowers. Notice who plants the church in Antioch in verse 20.

Some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greek speakers also, preaching the Lord Jesus. Who plants the first church in this strategic city?

[6 : 19] Paul? Peter? John? James? No. Some men.

Nobodies. People whose names are unknown to us. Some men from Cyprus, that means Europe, and others from Cyrene, that means Africa.

So African and European Christians flee Jerusalem. And interestingly, they don't go to the safety of their homelands, to the south or to the west, but rather they go north, to a land where they are not from.

People whom the author deems too insignificant to name, plant what will become the central church of the Christian movement. Ordinary, unremarkable, normal, unrecognizable Christians are the ones who started this church.

And they start it almost by accident. Incidentally. There was no leadership group, no theology degrees, no celebrity pastor, no fundraising campaign.

[7 : 30] They had no building, no cool name or logo or website. They had no plan. They didn't know they were planting a church at all. So what makes a church grow?

What makes faith grow? We've looked at the soil and sowers of the first church plant, and now the third thing, the seed. Before our story, Christians watched Stephen get stoned to death for preaching about Jesus.

And the surviving Christians scatter. They run away. And what are these refugee Christians on the run to avoid persecution do once they reach new, safe cities like Antioch, where Christianity is unknown?

Incredibly, they do exactly what Stephen was killed for. They talk about Jesus wherever they go. They cannot stop sharing what has happened.

They gossip the gospel. What makes faith grow in the unlikelyst of soils by the unlikelyst of sowers is the seed. The seed that grows is the gospel.

[8 : 39] And the seed is the good news of Jesus. The soil of Antioch is toxic. It's terrible. The sowers in our story are anonymous.

They're nobodies. Normal, everyday Christians. Their speaking ability is unknown to us. It's irrelevant. And this should give us all great hope.

It means that no one is too far gone for the seed of the gospel to be sown in their hearts and for faith to grow. The power is not in the sowers, in you or in me, sharing Christ with our city.

The power of God that brings growth is the gospel. The gospel was first spoken to the Jewish communities that scattered, that the scattered Christians come into contact with.

And this makes sense. Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish scriptures, the Jewish faith. He's the Jewish Messiah. Jesus fulfills all Jewish hope.

[9 : 42] He's what faithful Jewish people then and now are waiting for, whether they realize it or not. But these anonymous evangelists then do something that no self-respecting Jew would ever think of doing back then.

They start talking to non-Jews, to pagans, to Greeks. And not only are they speaking, the text says they are preaching, which is actually a very bad translation.

Because the word in the original Greek is the verb to evangelize. So they were not coming to Antioch and preaching, as in doing what I'm doing now.

There was no church. There was no gathering. Rather, what they were doing was in their everyday life, they were sharing the news of Jesus in their normal conversations. One commentator calls it gossiping the gospel.

They're sharing the good news that Jesus is Lord in normal, everyday, casual conversations, wherever the Lord carries them, in the marketplace, around the kitchen table, on a walk with a friend, at work.

[10 : 53] Acts 11 shows us the gospel is all you need. The gospel is the seed that plants every church and flowers to create faith in every believer. It doesn't matter how bad the soil is.

And it doesn't matter how good the sower is. It's the seed, the gospel, that brings growth. But what is the gospel? How would you summarize the gospel if you were asked?

The gospel, the seed of faith, is summarized in its simplest form in verse 20. The gospel is the Lord Jesus. The gospel is a person.

The gospel is an announcement that there is a Lord who is Lord over all. The gospel is that Jesus is Lord. And he isn't like the other lords.

He isn't like Caesar or Charles or Xi Jinping or Vladimir Putin. He doesn't just threaten foreign armies or attempt to subdue enemy nations. The Lord Jesus has gone to war and defeated death.

[12 : 03] He was killed on a Roman cross and then he rose again. He told us when he was with us that he is God's king and God's son. And because of his love and his mercy he has taken upon himself the sin of the world and paid the punishment we deserve.

God accepted his sacrifice by raising him from the dead and through him now offering eternal life to all who believe. Jesus, therefore, is Lord over death and over life.

He died and has now been seen alive, resurrected, perhaps even by the anonymous people who are now sharing the gospel in Antioch. And because he is alive it means he is Lord over all.

Heaven has come to earth in him. The boundaries of heaven and earth overlap in him as the kingdom of God now extends over the earth.

The Lord Jesus embodies a new creation, a re-creation. whereby sin and death are overwhelmed and forgiven by light and life.

[13 : 14] And all of us are invited to know that the Lord Jesus is alive and to live in him forever. All of this is encapsulated in the simple statement that Jesus is Lord.

And to evangelize is simply to share this news. for Jewish people the word Lord is used for God. We see this countless times in both the Old Testament and the New.

So a church in Antioch was planted and the seed of the church was a message and the message simply was this. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is God.

He has died for you to forgive you your sins. He has risen from the dead to prove His sacrifice worked and now offers all of us eternal life through faith in Him.

This gospel is the seed that once planted enables faith to grow. Churches grow out of the gospel of the Lord Jesus being proclaimed.

[14 : 25] So wherever Christians went they spoke and they spoke and they spoke about the good news that Jesus is Lord. It had transformed their lives transformed their realities transformed their anxieties.

It was good news of great joy for everybody and so they couldn't wait to share it. And they sowed the seeds of the gospel everywhere. They were gripped by the gospel of grace and so they gossiped the gospel.

They couldn't get it out of their heads. They could not stop sharing it with everyone around them. When the gospel is preached when Jesus is declared to be Lord of all where the gospel seed is sown faith springs up and the church grows.

Christianity is the most successful movement in world history. It has spread out and produced growth almost everywhere it has gone.

Why is that? You could explore every historical sociological cultural philosophical psychological reason and still be stuck scratching your head.

[15 : 39] The reason the church grew is given in verse 21. The reason the church continues to grow globally is given in verse 21. The hope for our community and our world is given in verse 21.

The hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. So the same Lord who is our gospel Jesus proves his lordship by continuing to work within the church to ensure his gospel spreads and his kingdom covers the whole earth.

In Antioch as well as here the seed that plants faith is his gospel and the gardener that grows the seed is the Lord.

God is the gardener is the Lord over all the earth. The world is his field his vineyard and so he like a gardener is hard at work ensuring his harvest.

The hand of Jesus is what causes the gospel to grow in Antioch and in Vancouver today. the Lord Jesus the king of the kingdom of heaven God's beloved son is at work through his followers to spread his gospel.

[16 : 59] Jesus isn't sitting up in the clouds enjoying the view from his throne. Jesus today is at work in the world extending his kingdom sending his spirit cultivating his garden so that his church and his kingdom would flourish.

Perhaps this morning he's at work in you cultivating your heart to embrace his gospel. Our job in evangelism is simply this to be willing to share with people that Jesus is Lord.

But our evangelism our words no matter how eloquent or how clumsy are not what cause people to believe. It's the Lord Jesus who sows his seed and softens hard hearts that faith may take root and grow.

The church grows in Acts 11 because of Jesus' power and presence animating the work of his followers. The gospel is the declaration that Jesus is Lord and Jesus then proves he is Lord by empowering his people and sending them to share his gospel and build up his church.

in our story the church in Jerusalem the original church the mother church hears about what's happening in Antioch and they send Barabbas down to see what's going on and what Barabbas sees in Antioch is described in verse 23 as the grace of God sorry not Barabbas Barnabas Barnabas sees that the Lord's hand is at work here he sees God the gardener cultivating a new branch in his vine by grace the most cosmopolitan diverse group of people imaginable a trading city a provincial capital full of Jews and non-Jews Romans Asians Africans Barnabas sees with his own eyes they have all come to believe in Jesus as Lord so in the field of the Lord it is the Lord who is the gardener it is God's hand that works the plow that plants the seed and that gives the growth

[19 : 18] Barnabas comes and he's amazed by what he sees happening at this new community of Jesus followers and what Barnabas now does is provide fertilizer for this new sapling church so if you're still with me so far we've looked at the soil the sowers the seed and the gardener of the first church plant and now let's look at the nutrients the good stuff the fertilizer that makes faith grow we're told at the end of verse 23 that Barnabas exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose I'm going to read you a few verses from our text and see if you can find what the fertilizer is in this fledgling new church verse 20 people are preaching verbally sharing that Jesus is Lord in verse 23 Barnabas is exhorting encouraging and inviting people to remain faithful and grow in their faith in verse 26

Barnabas and Paul then begin teaching at Antioch for an entire year and in verse 27 prophets are coming regularly to speak so what's the church in Antioch doing how is the gardener giving nutrients for the seed of the gospel to take root and grow the people are listening they're learning they're being taught God's word they're being preached to exhorted taught and hearing prophecy the young church has an appetite to learn more and more and more about Jesus and his gospel Barnabas comes and he encourages the church to grow by teaching them the gospel exhorting them to remain faithful and steadfast in purpose and then he goes north to Tarsus and grabs this guy he knows called Saul a great teacher and for a year Barnabas and Saul teach this young church non-stop about the gospel of God's grace this new church sapling in Antioch is like a newborn baby that just wants to eat all the time we had babies that wanted to eat all the time this new church wants to learn more and more and more about Jesus and his gospel the church in Antioch is a place of learning they hunger and they thirst for righteousness and what's happening inside the Antioch church plant is teaching preaching exhorting evangelizing inviting and prophesying there's hunger for the word of God to sit under teaching and learn more and more and more about Jesus and his gospel sitting under faithful teaching of the word of God is the good soil where the gospel will grow faithful teaching is the fertilizer of the church in Antioch the first church plant was centered in learning learning the gospel learning about

Jesus learning about Anglicanism after the service that was a joke hearing God's word proclaimed and preached and taught there was obviously a passion for it to finish I briefly want to highlight the fruit of the first church plant in Antioch the church in Antioch is a learning church and from learning the gospel it is also a working church truly effective teaching and preaching ought to result in visible acts of love throughout the church in the verses right after our text we're told a prophet arrives in the church in Antioch and gives a word from the Lord and the word is that a famine is coming not to Antioch but to the south to Judea to the region around Jerusalem and upon hearing this word from the Lord the disciples of Antioch a multicultural Gentile Jewish Roman Asian African community determine each according to their ability to send relief to their sisters and brothers who live in Judea see a learning church full of the

Holy Spirit is also a loving church where deeds of mercy and love flow naturally from their knowledge of the gospel and their faith in Jesus it should be expected and encouraged that churches that like to learn about Jesus become churches that love like Jesus and we should be wary of churches that are only interested in learning without applying their faith in love a church that learns but does not love is like a big beautiful fruit tree that never produces any fruit for anyone to enjoy the seed of the gospel grows in people and it produces fruit and where the church embodies its Lord and becomes the hands and feet of Jesus the kingdom of life and love is brought and light shines to the darkest places on earth so that's the first church plant it's born out of persistent persecution not ideal soil it's planted by ordinary Christians telling people in every context that

Jesus is Lord its seed is the gospel it is nurtured by the very hand of the Lord he is the gardener he is the one who makes faith grow and it's a learning church where disciples of Jesus are nurtured and fed by faithful teaching that centers on Jesus and finally it's a loving church where the fruit of faith where the fruit of the spirit namely the love of neighbor and of God is born out that's the first church plant story and it can be our story too it can be your story we've been given the same seed the gospel and it is as potent and powerful today as it was back then we should not be ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes we have the Lord within us his

[25 : 52] Holy Spirit empowers us and works through us God is our gardener the Lord of the harvest and because he is at work the harvest is plentiful we have the fertilizer required to grow in the gospel our nutrients come from the word of God faithfully read and taught and so now let us do the work of ministry to bear fruit for the gospel to be a community of contrast gripped by the gospel of grace sharing Christ with our city amen women and find out who globe is Elohim teacher guideune Vorim Lord ■■■■■■