

***Message: Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth VI:
Acts 13:1-14:28 II
Paul & Barnabas, Again***

Introduction!

Friends, we're back in Acts, and we're skipping ahead a little bit from last week.

Last week, we left off as John Mark left Paul and Barnabas. That was in Perga, in Pamphylia. Let's locate that.

Map

Pamphylia is a Roman Province; Perga a port city. From here, Paul and Barnabas head north to Antioch. But not their Antioch, a different Antioch. Antioch in the Pisidian region, which was part of the Galatian province. (This map blurs the boundaries between Pamphylia, Pisidia, Lyconeum, and Galatians. I know it upsets you; try not to be too distracted; sometimes these areas were part of Galatia, sometimes they were their own things. It's all a mess.)

And Paul and Barnabas do their thing, you know. Paul presents the Gospel in a brilliant way, it takes up most

of Chapter 13. They start in the synagogue, and get some brilliant results; in the end, basically the whole town gathers to hear what they're saying on a Saturday, but a faction in the Hellenistic synagogue condemns them as they're speaking, even though a lot of people are really into it. This happens:

46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

"I have made you[f] a light for the Gentiles, that you[g] may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'[h]"

48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

49 The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.

What's important is that it's this moment, this experience, which causes Paul to change his methods.

From now on he won't necessarily start in the synagogue, the way he has been, but will focus on the God-fearers, the philosophers, on whichever Gentiles will listen to him. But, look: Luke presents this as cut and dried here, but then in the next scene, they've left and headed out to Iconium, and, surprise, started in the synagogue. So. Make of it what you will. Jews and Gentiles both are persuaded by what they share, and they make a huge ruckus, enough of one that both Jews and Greeks get together to try to stone the two of them, but they escape. They head south a little to the Lystra-Derbe corridor, and do some things, and that's where we pick up the story. It's one that can challenge us to think about who we talk to about God, and how we say what we say.

Let's pray first.

Prayer:

In Lystra: A Man Who Was Lame

We start with this information:

8 In Lystra there sat a man who was lame.

Okay. And what else do we know about him?

He had been that way from birth and had never walked.

From the perspective of the story Luke's asking us to enter into, this is a critical note. When we discover in the next moment that this man is healed, it's doubly-miraculous. He's never walked.

9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed 10 and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

So this man, who has never stood, stands. And the man who has never stood, walks.

And this reminds us of the healings Jesus himself offered to those around him, of course; it's meant to. Just as in John 5, it's in this man's obedience that he's healed. He does what Paul says, and in doing what Paul says, he realizes he can stand.

Standing Up: Trusting Obedience

We can get caught on the moment when Paul

identifies the man's readiness for healing. Luke says, as the NIV puts it, "Paul...saw that he had faith to be healed." We fail if we confuse what is, here, a trusting relationship for economic exchange. That is, we read this and think the man had enough faith, enough belief, that he could sort of pile it up, and exchange it for the ability to walk. That's not it at all. That misses the point completely. Paul could see, in staring directly at this guy, that his trust in God was enough to listen to Paul when Paul said "Stand." He had trust. Faith, trust, belief; this is all the same word in Greek; we translate it as we see fit. But in this moment, Paul saw that this man had enough trust to stand when he was told to stand. He trusts the God Paul is talking about, and in that way, trusts Paul, too.

So this healing, it's a big deal. It's a model to us of trusting obedience, and what can happen when we listen to God or listen to those who authentically, honestly, speak by the Spirit for God.

We're used to one-off healings in the New Testament. They're a trope, a thing that happens. We see them relatively often. But it's true that when they're mentioned, they're usually mentioned because of what happens afterward. What happens after this isn't what

we'd expect, though. It's a sign that Paul and Barnabas aren't in Judea anymore; they're out in the Gentile world, the Roman world, where assumptions aren't the same as they ones in Jerusalem. We read this:

A Big Response:

11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

Look: This is a big response, right? I mean, just...big. Not what we'd expect. Luke tells us that the crowd is speaking in the "Lycaonian language," and they use Greek names for the Roman Pantheon: Zeus instead of Jupiter, Hermes instead of Mercury. Lycaonian was apparently more Greek than Latin. And I love that the priest of the Temple to Zeus outside the city starts hauling in bulls and wreaths so everyone can get it on the sacrifice that they want to have to Barnabas and

Paul, because they've done this amazing thing.

And let's notice this: the crowd is spiritually hungry, open and ready for miracles. The crowd is trying to understand what's just happened in the framework that they have to understand it. They're slotting these two guys into their worldview in a way that makes sense to them. The crowd is responding appropriately, except that they're wrong. It makes sense to respond in a big way to what they perceive as the "gods" favor. The crowd is honestly sort of doing everything right, except that they're completely wrong. Their desire is good; their attribution is off.

If we remember Herod the Tetarch, we wonder what's going to happen now. We read about how he addressed the crowds in Caesarea, and they responded, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Herod, because he didn't shut down the crowd, and direct their praise to God, died. What will Paul and Barnabas do? Will they be struck down, too?

Well. C'mon. They'll do what's right, right? And they do.

Correcting:

14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15 “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. 16 In the past, he let all nations go their own way. 17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” 18 Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

I love the understatement here: “Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.” Oh, really? I mean no crowd wants a buzz-kill. Paul’s like the parent who just got home early in the middle of a big party the kid has thrown, and is shutting it down. Who wants to listen?

But Paul and Barnabas also make a huge point here: “You’re wrong.” You’re slotting us into an

understanding of the world that is “worthless,” as they put it. They lay out an enormously important theological point: “in the past, God let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season; he provides you with plenty of food and fills you hearts with joy.” God was focused on the Jewish people, preparing the way for his Messiah; even as he blessed others and revealed aspects of it's goodness, but that focus is over, now, and now these Gentiles need to realize that they can't “go their own way” anymore. It hasn't been Zeus or Hermes or any of the other made-up, false gods of the Greek and Roman Pantheons that have been blessing these Lystrans. It's been God all along, giving what we call “Common Grace”--their environment, their food, pleasure.

And their fruitful environment and their experience of Joy has been meant to waken in them the knowledge of God. Almost no one would have thought the world around them was simply a product of natural, scientific processes; they would have assumed--and did--that it was supernatural sources that sustained the world. Paul is both affirming and correcting them, here: Your desire to attribute this miracle to us is good. The

desire is good. Your attribution is wrong, though. None of what you are thankful for is because of Zeus, Hermes, or any other Roman god: It's because of the God we've been talking about, the "living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them."

And there's a breath holding moment here. Will they listen? Will they realize what Paul and Barnabas are saying: I affirm your desires; but your attribution needs corrected. Will they hear him?

Violent Intervention:

They don't. Other voices intervene, and turn the crowd's energy in another direction.

19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.

Here's an evil trick: You can always turn someone else's unmet expectations into violence. The crowd wanted a party; wanted to honor these men as gods. You feel like they almost could have been persuaded to trust "the living God," see the good in their desires

and the bad in their idolatry, but...these synagogue enemies, who have followed Barnabas and Paul, shift this moment of opportunity into a moment of retaliation, release, wrath.

Standing Up: Community

The scene ends this way:

20 But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

Paul's time here started when he told someone to get up, and they trusted God through him to do it, and in their obedience, discovered their healing. Here, Paul has to stand up, too. He stands up into community, surrounded by Jesus' followers. And he limps his way back to where he was staying, which is a bold thing to do, seemingly surrounded by the church as he goes, and moves on from Lystra into Derby.

If we want to treat today's passage as a strategy guide, let's do it. Here's what we'd take away:

Appreciating Desire:

The spiritual desire that people have is good. When

people have an inclination to offer worship, to believe that there is provision in the world, to wonder who or what deserves their appreciation for joy, food, pleasure, it is good. The desire itself bears witness to God. It's our work to gently--and Paul and Barnabas do act gently here--it's our work to gently, sensitively, and appropriately direct people toward "the living God," by which Paul and Barnabas mean "the real God" the active God who really lives. We direct people to Jesus, who is the one who made good on God's promises to all creation, and did so by way of the Jewish people and the Jewish Messiah.

Correcting Attribution:

What we can't do, ought not do, is confuse desire with attribution, and just throw people under the bus because they get wrong the things we know are right, or trust in ideas that are untrustworthy. No one should be punished or abused because their view of how the world works doesn't have God at its center.

And we have to notice that this re-direction toward what's true by Paul and Barnabas is framed by two acts of standing up.

Paul perceives that the person he's speaking to is full

of trust. The person trusts Paul; trusts that God is as Paul says. And Paul takes that opportunity to call the person to stand. Are we sensitive enough to the people around us to know what they trust? Do we speak clearly enough for people to trust the words that we say when we talk about God? Do we even talk about God?

Later:

Later, Paul will have to stand up himself. He'll be forced to do just as he asked the lame man to do. He'll have to eat his own words, practice what he preaches, act with the same obedience he invited the man to. It's a good opportunity to remind us that what we ask of others are things we ourselves have to take on. When we call people to live a certain way, believe certain things, obey the Lord--stand up--we ourselves will be forced to do the things we ask of others. Some future thing will always force us to practice what we preach. We'll be forced by circumstances or antagonism to act on the same trust in God that we often give lip-service to, talk about all the time. What we'll also discover, though, is that when we ourselves do the things we tell others they have to do, we won't be doing it alone. We rise into community. When we have to practice what we preach, we don't do it by

ourselves.

What do we say is Christian? What do we say Christians ought to do? What do we say is the right way to live? How are we not living up to our own calls of obedience? Because circumstances or people will for us, someday, to practice what we preach.

Conclusion:

What I appreciate about Paul standing up at the end, having to do exactly what he called the first man to do, is that it's a reminder of how little control we have over not only others, but ourselves. His enemies snuck in, egged on the crowd, and he was pelted with rocks until he was practically dead. And the reminder of a lack of control over others is something we need to keep in mind if we're going to talk about God well, if we're going to both affirm the desire people have, while being honest about their misunderstandings about God. If there's a virtue at the heart of today's passage, it's humility.

So: Who are we talking to about God? We will have to eat our words; we'll have to practice what we preach. If we can be humble, we can appreciate the good in the desire people have, even knowing that we cannot

control their response, and if their response somehow is manipulated into our hurt, results in our loss, then we have to remember that we won't be left alone, but can rise up with the community of the church offering us whatever protection and help we need, so that we can move forward in dependence and humility.