

Sunday February 2nd, 2025

Acts 14:8-20

Series: Lessons From the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Lystra"

There was a visitor to a local zoo, who happened to notice a zoo attendant, quietly sobbing by himself on a nearby park bench. Being troubled by what he saw, the visitor asked another attendant why the man was crying. "The second attendant explained that one of their elephants had just died. The visitor was touched by the sad news and then asked, "I assume he must have been particularly fond of that elephant?" The reply came back, "No, it's not that. He's crying because he's the one that must dig the grave." (1001 Humorous Illustrations)

Have you ever had one of those days? You know the ones I am talking about, where you go to work, or to school, or simply to your regular activities, and something out of the ordinary and negative happens? Of course you have; we all have. We all have days that seem, despite our best intentions, to go sideways, and most of the time we persevere, hoping that the next day will be back to normal, and whatever crisis we face will have been resolved.

I wonder if you have noticed something about the Apostle Paul, and if you haven't yet, I encourage you to pay attention as we make our way through Acts, to a surprising and disturbing trend. It seems that almost every time Paul shows up somewhere to preach, a riot breaks out along with a revival. This is odd, considering that most often when I preach, the reaction is only coffee and genial conversation. I don't know how Paul could stand it. Well, I do. He persevered because Jesus was with him, and Ananias told Paul he would suffer in Acts 9.

In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabus continue in their first missionary journey entering the region of Lycaonia, and in particular the city or town of Lystra. The town of Lystra was inhabited by the remnants of a small Anatolian tribe who spoke their own dialect, which was spoken up to the 6th century AD. Although Roman rule was established there, Latin inscriptions found in the area suggest that the occupants of the town kept many of their native customs.

Anatolia is a region of modern Turkey. Ancient Lycra is now just a mound, so far never disturbed by archeologists, located in the modern city of Latik. Now we need to understand that Lycra is different from the two Antiochs, Damascus and Jerusalem, because Lycra had no Jewish Synagogue. There was likely no known Jewish presence in this city. The reason for this is likely because Lycra was primarily an agricultural center and was not known for its business activities.

It was clearly a tight knit community due to its shared ethnic background, and distinct dialect, and outsiders were probably not warmly welcomed. Nor would Lystra be seen as a promising location to make profit. So, the inhabitants of the city were Gentiles, and as we will see their religious affiliation was with the Greek gods.

This is significant, because as we saw before, Paul's strategy was to go into a city and immediately head for the synagogue and first preach the gospel message to the Jews and any devout Gentile believers. It was a sound strategy, because Paul could establish a good base of believers in a synagogue, due to the Jews pre-existing biblical knowledge. Paul could quote the scriptures to make his argument that Jesus is the Messiah.

In Lycra, he couldn't do this, so the question presented itself, how he was to get the people to listen to his message. Well, God provides an opportunity, as he always does, in the form of a man who was handicapped from birth. A man who has never walked and probably was left on the street as a beggar. Just as in Acts 3 when Peter healed a man with a similar condition, Paul now heals the man by the power of God. The man immediately jumps up and starts walking. Everyone knew this man in town, and knew he couldn't walk; so how did this happen?

The whole town is now in a tizzy. The whole town drops whatever they were doing and rushes to Paul and Barnabus, who have barely got inside the town gates. At first Paul and Barnabus may have been pleased with the crowd's attention, but something is wrong, very wrong. Sure, Paul got their attention, but you know the expression, "lost in translation", well that is kind of what happened here.

Paul had expected the people of Lycra to come in response to the healing and then be intent to listen to him as he shared the gospel, but Paul and Barnabus had walked headfirst into the local customs and religion of the people. The townsfolk having witnessed the miracle, assumed out of their cultural background and religion, that Paul and Barnabus were two of their gods in human form. In Greek mythology, it was a common belief that the gods often took on human form to interact with people.

Quite often they were said to procreate with humans to make demi-gods, or half gods like Hercules. Paul had unwittingly triggered a collective memory of a story from the misty past. It seems there was a myth about the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes (or Jupiter and Mercury the Roman version) coming in human form to a town just like Lycra. In the myth, Zeus and Hermes found they were unwelcomed by the residents, except by an elderly couple who invite the two gods into their home.

The couple was rewarded for their kindness, because out of anger the gods destroyed the town, except of course, for the elderly couple's home. Remember these people are simple farmers and very superstitious as well, Lycra isn't going to make the same mistake as that town in the myth. They didn't want their town destroyed. To the people of Lycra, it was logical that only a god can heal someone, so clearly Paul and Barnabus are gods in disguise. Paul, because he spoke, was assumed to be Hermes, and Barnabus was therefore Zeus.

So quickly, the town rushes up to the two missionaries not to listen to them preach, but to worship them. At first it seems that Paul and Barnabus are confused by this. As Jewish men, they may have never heard of this story about Zeus and Hermes. It was Luke, who was a Gentile who made the connection when recording these events. The Jews in other towns never acted like this, neither did the Gentiles.

Adding to the impulsiveness of the people, was the fact that the temple of Zeus was very near where the missionaries were when they healed the man, and word gets back to the temple priest. In haste, the priest and his entourage, come to where the people had gathered, bringing bulls and wreaths which they plan to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabus. Finally, understanding the intent of the people, Paul and Barnabus are horrified.

Their desire to gain the town's attention has clearly backfired. To even suggest such a sacrifice to them, was an affront to their faith, both as Jewish men, and as Christians. Paul and Barnabus try very hard to reject the offer of sacrifice and praise, in fact, they do something that clearly demonstrates their disfavor with this attention. They tear their clothes and run into the crowd begging them to stop their idolatry.

The tearing of clothes was important, because no one in the Middle East would misinterpret how upset the two men were. The crowd thought they were gods, but when they tore their clothes, they demonstrated their humanness, that they were just flesh and blood. You can hear the anguish in their words. "Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings like yourselves!" Admittedly, it was a bit of a wet blanket they threw on the festivities, but it was a necessary thing.

Paul and Barnabus were just ordinary men with an important message for the people of Lycra. That message, of course, being that they serve the one true God, and the sacrifices and beliefs of the people of Lycra are worthless. I am sure that went over well. I mean, no one likes to think their beliefs are worthless. I mean look at all the money we put into a temple. Wait a minute! Hold on! Maybe it's a test? So, the crowd starts up again with renewed vigor, and Paul and Barnabus can't get them to stop their effort to worship them, and sacrifice to them.

What an awful mess! But it gets worse. It seems that Paul and Barnabus were not the only ones to come from Antioch. Some Jews, who hated the Christians and especially Paul, had followed them to Lycra. Paul, who hunted down Christians, now becomes the hunted. How these unnamed Jews did it, I don't know, but the Jews whipped the crowd up into a murderous mob. The people went from wanting to worship Paul and Barnabus, to killing them. In a rage, they dragged Paul out of the town, stoned him, and left him, for dead.

Then we read this amazing verse that states that as the believers stood around him, Paul got up and walked back into the city. The next day, he and Barnabus left for Derbe. Now one interesting thing here that is kind of niggling in my brain is, where was Barnabus when Paul was stoned? What happened to him? I can find no clear answer to that, other than he must have been with the other believers who stood around Paul.

There is something that I almost missed here that is important. In all the flurry of attempted sacrifices and stoning, some folks came to believe. The believers who stood around Paul had to have come from somewhere. Despite the struggle, and opposition, the gospel took hold in a few hearts. Not necessarily a big group, but a group none the less. And in verse 21 we read that after preaching in Derbe, Paul and Barnabus returned to Lycra to strengthen the believers.

The one clear lesson that arises out of this passage, at least as I see it, is that the church must always be aware that when it speaks to people, it is almost always speaking cross culturally. Now I need to be clear here that when I say cross cultural in this instance, I am speaking very broadly. If we are believers in Christ Jesus, anyone else who does not yet know Jesus is in a different culture. In our Christian culture, like all cultures, we have a: shared history, traditions, stories, and language that only Christians use.

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If you randomly go up to a person outside the Christian culture, and ask something like “are you redeemed by the blood of the lamb”? They might think you are off your rocker. Just think about how many sporting events, and family events are now scheduled on Sunday’s, and how people react when you say you can’t make it, because you are going to church. How many of your neighbours leave their homes on Sunday morning to go to church?

The world doesn’t get it. It is increasingly impossible to say to someone outside of Christians circles that they must do something, because the bible tells us so. Do you see what I am saying? Your neighbours, co-workers, or other family members are likely just as confused about your faith as the people of Lystra were about Paul and Barnabus. I know I have extended family members who struggle to understand my being a minister.

My dear departed aunt Ruth used to teasingly say that it must be hard for me to explain my family to my parishioners. On the bigger stage, when one of our fellow Christians or churches does something very un-Christ like, we often get painted with the same brush. I know when I hear such stories, I often say a quiet prayer, “Please don’t let them be Baptist.” When Christians join to protest a social issue, we are often thought of as: out of touch, backward, or narrow minded and bigoted.

So, first I need to name for you what you have likely experienced, and feel quite often, but maybe have never clearly identified. We, as followers of Jesus are indeed different from the world. How you and I see the world, because Christ dwells in us, is fundamentally different from a good part of this world. For our own sanity, and effectiveness as witnesses, we need to acknowledge this and to embrace that difference.

It is who we are, and we can do nothing about it, and we should be unapologetic about it too, but that’s another topic for another day. The question before us, as it was before Paul and Barnabus, is not how do we get the people we are witnessing to, think like we do, because without Christ in their lives they are not going to; but rather how do we use our God given creativity to bridge the gap without causing a riot?

How do I reach someone, who only knows the name Jesus as a swear word, or only knows that bibles are those books Gideons place in hotel rooms? You begin by recognizing what you are up against. Paul and Barnabus were clearly caught off guard, blindsided, because they were unaware of the depth of the pagan religion in Lycra. In Jesus’ words, these were a very sick people, living in great darkness.

Jesus told us that he came to heal the sick, and that is what those of us who have embraced Christ have experienced. We have been healed. Now we live, and serve, and socialize in a new reality; but many of our friends and family do not. Jesus’ analogy of illness is a good help to us. We are never to think of people in this world as us, verses them. Instead, we are to see others as people who desperately need what we have, a cure.

That was how Paul saw the people of Lycra and every other place he went. He didn’t think less of them for believing in pagan gods, he just knew of a better life path. Paul ached for them, because he himself knew what it was like to not know Jesus.

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So, our strategy becomes one of revealing illness and offering the cure. We must become adept at lovingly asking the questions, and promoting the inner soul searching, that reveals the emptiness of a life without Christ. We must always be ready to respond to the crises in people's lives when they don't know what to do with, "I know what to do. I know who can help."

The challenge is not to get people into the church, but rather to take the church, that is you and I, to people. Why? If, as was my thesis in this message, that the Christians of this world make up its own cultural group, then let me encourage you to flaunt that difference. If people get to know us and see that we are different from the world in a good way, then they are bound to be attracted to what we have.

Chuck Swindoll gives the following example to make this point. He writes, "*It is my opinion that the best evangelistic center in the greater metropolitan Boston area is not a church. It's a filling station in Arlington. It was owned and operated by a man named Bob who caught the vision early in his life that his vocation and his calling were welded together. As time passed, his station became known as the place to go for gas, new tires, or other car services.*

I have seen a half-dozen cars lined up bumper to bumper near two pumps in front of that little station just waiting to be served by that man. He has no banners out, no "Jesus Saves" flags, no signs, and no fish symbols, nothing plastered all over the station or in the windows. No sign saying, "Bring your car to Bob and take your soul to Jesus." He simply did his job! He did it well and people knew he was in partnership with the Lord. He led dozens of people to faith in Jesus Christ. (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p. 183) People may not understand systematic theology but they understand fairness, honesty, peace and love.

The world may never say this, but frankly it really does want us to be different.