

The Gospel Just Doesn't Fit

Acts 13: 1-3; 14: 8-18

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Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler,[a] and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.....In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. 9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, 10 said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And the man[a] sprang up and began to walk.

11 When the crowds 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,[b] brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. 14 When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, 15 "Friends,[c] why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. 16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; 17 yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy." 18 Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

The long awaited Saturday had finally arrived! The Gage Park Track and Field team, the school's first in decades, descended bus steps towards the huge gymnasium complex with excitement and anticipation. Trailing as the group's caboose, I felt both pride and concern for my team. As one of their coaches, I knew how hard they'd worked to get here. Just weeks ago none of them had run a relay, and today they were competing against youth from all over Chicago. The students had put in many hours of practice and deserved to have this opportunity. But I was also concerned for them, knowing that our team, primarily freshman and sophomore Latino students, was small, both in its number of athletes and the size of those athletes. That reality became crystal clear as we sauntered across the gym to our team area, passing team after team of big, tall and muscular high schoolers.

The Gage Park track team was a motley crew, no other way to describe it. You'd never expect them to be at a city-wide track meet, but they were there, ready to offer their best.

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The motley crew of Christians worshipping at the church in Antioch was ready to offer their best, too. They are not the disciples we know, Peter, Andrew, James or John. These are new, foreign names, like Manaen, Lucius, Barnabas and Simeon the Niger. These are not disciples who traveled with Jesus, or had ever met Jesus. There was also Saul, a man known for his role of persecuting Christians. They are a motley crew, an odd assortment of new Christians with whom God gets creative.

The Holy Spirit surprises the men during their worship by calling on Saul, also known as Paul, and Barnabas and setting them apart. The Spirit tells them to go; to leave Antioch and proclaim the Good News to the Jews and Gentiles in the surrounding community.

The Holy Spirit sets apart two men with little experience sharing the Good News and with new faith to Jewish and Gentile communities who do not know about Jesus at all, and some don't even know about God. A daunting mission, for two recent converts.

Have you ever been set apart by someone who knew you well...a boss, a mentor, or a parent... for a huge task that you knew you didn't really have the background to do? How did it feel? Flattering? Exciting? Overwhelming? I bet Paul and Barnabas felt similar emotions.

I suspect their naiveté about the challenges and the danger they'd find in the communities they visited kept their anxiety at bay. As we all know, sometimes ignorance can enable us to do something we otherwise wouldn't.

God called Barnabas and Paul, and they said yes. They depart for their mission and, as described in the rest of chapter 13, begin to share the Good News. We meet them in this morning's scripture in chapter 14, when they have moved from cities surrounding Antioch to a northwest region, modern day Turkey. The city had a reputation as a backwater community populated by uneducated people; uneducated people who have heard nothing about this monotheistic God.

Barnabas and Paul's task is not unlike Peter's that we heard about last week. Peter proclaimed the Good News to Cornelius and his friends, also gentiles. But, Cornelius was a God-fearing man. He was an uncircumcised Roman, but he was a devout believer in God, too. The folks that Barnabas and Paul encounter in Lystra have never heard of God, and believe in their polytheistic Greek gods like Zeus and Hermes.

Barnabas and Paul begin their ministry in Lystra performing a miracle, grabbing the attention of the people standing nearby. A man who had never before walked was healed by Paul and stood on his feet. The crowds of people watching were amazed. "The gods have come down to us in human form!" they exclaimed (Acts 14:11). To the gentile people gathered round, Barnabas became Zeus and Paul, Hermes.

They immediately take the ambiguity of the scene and put the foreign visitors in the only divine box they had in their minds, the Greek god box, as a way to make sense of what they'd seen. This made sense given the commonly accepted notion they had that gods could and would appear in human form.

Last week, my younger son Peter, who is five, and I were talking about his cousin Chloe. He asked why we don't ever visit Chloe. I told him why – because Chloe lives in California and she is twenty years old, busy with her own life. To use terms he knows, I said she is more like a grown-up cousin than a kid cousin, like his cousin Ella, who is 11. He was quiet a moment and said Oh...Is she still my cousin or is she something else?

Peter was ready to give Chloe an entire new category in his mind, other than cousin, because she was a grown-up and not a child. Unlike us, every day Peter is being exposed to new things and new groups of people. He has no trouble reframing his understandings as his world expands. As we grow our openness and ability to reframe our thinking becomes more difficult. Our world stops being so expandable. We get to a point when we feel we have enough groupings and categories in our minds. Our brain's job becomes not to create but to organize. This is what the men and women in Lystra were doing with Barnabas and Paul. They put them in their Greek god category and promptly began to worship them as such...much to the dismay of the disciples! The last thing they wanted was for people to think they were gods!

The chasm between their understanding of God and the people's seemed too large to cross. Before Paul and Barnabas talked about Jesus, they had to get the people to understand the one true God. The first step in sharing the Good news was to convince the community to create a new God box. They had to reorient the people's thinking about divine power and creation. The Gospel just doesn't fit with any other understanding.

In many ways, the Gospel doesn't fit with understandings held in our twenty-first century context, either. According to a 2017 Pew Research report, over half of Americans think that religion is unnecessary to lead a good and moral life. A quarter of those interviewed described themselves as "nones", people who self-identify as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" (Smith 2017 www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/).

In a technologically advanced society driven by science, there is no *need* for religion. Consequently, religious belief is much lower in developed countries than underdeveloped ones. Japan has one of the highest standards of living in the world, but only 4% of its population claims to be religious, and much of Europe is in reached a "post-Christian" era, according to social scientists. (Ludden 2018 www.psychologytoday.com). Without needing faith to bring peace to uncertainty and explanation to our world, is it necessary to live life inclusive of God? Is it necessary to reorient our lives including God in them? To make the gospel fit into our lives?

In America's past and present, we have coopted the Gospel to fit our agendas.

Manifest Destiny held that God ordained the early American settlers to go across America claiming it as their own: to conquer and Christianize, controlling the people already living in the lands as the settlers saw fit. After all, God told them to do it. Yet, it is impossible to reconcile Jesus' Great Commandment to love your neighbor as yourself with the acts of death and destruction the settlers made on the American Indian.

The gospel always has and always will be domesticated to fit people's agendas, whether the agenda is to expand land or to live comfortably in a home. The pursuit of middle-class comfort

is, if not uniquely American, woven into the fabric of the American Dream. As Christians, it is easy to rationalize or fall into the assumption that God desires comfort for us.

We forget that throughout Scripture, this idea is repeatedly and relentlessly challenged. Christianity does not guarantee an easy life. As writer and Christian C.S. Lewis reveals, ““I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.” It is no wonder that many people reject the suggestion of reframing and reorienting their lives to make the gospel fit.

Paul and Barnabas make a valiant effort at bridging the chasm of belief between them and their audience. The men begin at the beginning, that God is the God of *all of humanity*, including themselves and everyone gathered that day:

“We are mortals just like you,” Paul says, “and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things [their Greek gods] to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (Acts 14:15). Paul and Barnabas attempt to level the playing field and to get the people to understand who they are not—Greek gods—even if the people aren’t really sure who these miracle-producing men are. Paul and Barnabas try to get the gentiles to connect what they know- the earth and the seas, with the God they don’t. Paul and Barnabas are trying to get the people to create a new box for God, one in which the Gospel will fit.

Today there are many than won’t create a new box for God. Religion for them is like trying to put a square peg in a round hole, it just doesn’t work.

But we aren’t like those people, the “nones”. After all, we are here! In this season of Eastertide, we rejoice that Jesus is risen. We rejoice that we are not held captive to fear but are made free in Christ, free to live and love and have life abundant. We are worshipping God, like Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch when they were set apart by the Holy Spirit.

Or are we? We are physically here, yes, but now three weeks after Easter has passed, has our joy tarnished? Has life returned back to normal? On this day, are our lives really lived through the frame of our faith? Or has the frame been resized over the years, made smaller to fit next to the other frames of our lives: our work, our culture, our family, our bank account?

Perhaps we to need our lives reframed again, to be reopened to experience God for who God is, not who we’ve made God out to be. The God who made heaven and earth and the seas. The God who made you and me. Perhaps we need to quiet the infinite distractions and voices from our heads that we might hear the Holy Spirit calling us.

The Holy Spirit calling us, setting us apart for ministry, ministry that we never imagined we’d lead. You can bet that when he was persecuting Christians, Paul never thought in a million years he’d be leading people to Christ and building churches! You can bet when Juan and Ronald and Gina started at Gage Park they never thought they’d be on a track and field team, representing their school! You can bet when I was coaching and teaching at Gage Park High

School on Chicago's South side I never thought I'd be a pastor at Northminster Presbyterian in Evanston! But friends, Our God is creative, and our God uses unlikely people to do magnificent things. Things you never thought possible. How might your life change if you let the Gospel fit in it more fully? Let's find out!

Work Cited

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