

Acts 14:1-28

Representing the Gospel in a Pluralistic Culture

Introduction: The book of Acts is the history of the earliest Christians. We've been following this amazing journey for sometime of how the Good News of who Jesus is and what he has done, spread from Jerusalem and reached to the ends of the earth. Here in our passage this morning we have the first ever sermon (if you can call it that) to people who have no background, or understanding of the God of the Bible. When the Gospel was preached to the first Gentiles back in Acts 10 - they were what was called God fearers - Gentiles who believed in the God of the Bible and studied and observed the Law of Moses. So this event is really the first of it's kind in the history of Christianity.

Luke has been recording that Paul and Barnabas had a custom and that was when they visited a city they would start by sharing the good news concerning Jesus in the Jewish synagogue. This way they already have a foundation of Monotheism, the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets. They had an audience that knew and longed for the fulfillment of all of God's promises through messiah - So they had this amazing foundation on which to present Jesus as Messiah - the fulfillment of God's promises. But here in Lystra, it's not that Paul and Barnabas are bitter at the Jews for rejecting their message so they don't go to the Synagogue. There is no mention of a synagogue and later in Acts we see Paul pick up this custom again. The lack of mention of a synagogue means that there were not even ten Jewish men living in this city (how many it took to establish a synagogue) -Lystra is a total pagan city - the first in the mission of the Gospel.

This passage could be titled The Gospel for pagans, if you will. Passages like these are actually very helpful to Christians living in a post christian culture like here in Sonoma county. Most the people that we rub shoulders with don't believe in the God of the Bible, in fact many following the thoughts of the "New Atheist" find him deplorable, they don't believe in Sin as the Bible describes it, they don't believe in a Spiritual realm in any sense, in fact. Often they don't even believe in any moral absolutes.. Often times we are left wondering where do we begin to share about our faith, or about Jesus, or salvation? This is where Paul found himself in the city of Lystra.

So what can we learn from this passage about representing Christ and the Gospel in a post Christian, pluralistic culture?

1. Love the needy

1. We're told that as Paul is preaching in Lystra there was man listening who had been crippled since birth. Paul saw that he had the faith to be healed - faith in the message that Paul was proclaiming... so Paul heals him and then all hell breaks loose..The people declaring that the Gods had come down to visit them..
2. All through out the NT, start with Jesus himself we see that Christianity is a word and deed religion. Signs/miracles constantly accompany the message of the gospel in the NT. In fact the Gospel demands an embodiment of what we believe about Jesus. What God has done for the state of our souls must be demonstrated through our lives in deeds of mercy and love by pouring ourselves out for the needs of those around us. Whatever opportunity presents itself. It should be no different in our church and our community -acts of mercy and generosity should also accompany the message of God's mercy and generosity. As Jesus said, all men will know that you are my disciples by your love for one another - But imagine what people would say and think if we pour ourselves out for those who cannot repay us, have no connection to us and are even enemies of Jesus and the Gospel? This is a strong witness to the kind of Love that is displayed in Jesus giving his life for his enemies... a powerful testament to the Gospel.

2. Identify the idols -

1. We need to give Paul a break on this one. It is completely off the cuff and he is doing it in order to restrain this mob from sacrificing to him and Barnabas. He doesn't even get to finish his message because he's lynched and almost stoned to death. But we can look at what Paul did say and assume that we know where he was going from other passages of scripture. First Paul tells them that the message that they are proclaiming is to Rescue from these "worthless things" to serve the living God. "Worthless things" in greek "mataios" is a negative way that the Jews (especially the scripture) speak of Idols or pagan gods. It means empty, deceptive, unfulfilling. Basically, they promise fulfillment but leave you empty and unfulfilled. The gods of ancient Greece and Rome were many, and you worshipped the god who was the patron of whatever thing you wanted. If you're a farmer

then you worshipped the god of agriculture; if you were a soldier you worshipped Athena the god of war; if you were a merchant you worshipped Hermes the god of merchants and travelers... and so on. But whatever deity you worshipped you constantly had to sacrifice to appease them and in order that good fortune would come to you..

2. Look at what Paul is saying - these idols are constantly taking from you, requiring more from you; they punish you when you don't give them what they want. He contrasts them with the true God who is faithful and gracious in all he does... "Turn from these vain things, he says, to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Paul is showing how everything that is good that is in our lives comes from God even though we have failed to acknowledge and worship him.. you couldn't get a greater contrast - like what James says, every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of Lights with him there is no shadow due to change..And yet we worship created things that never satisfy, always promise but can never deliver, always take and never give or relieve. If I could paraphrase what Paul is saying - look what God does for those who ignore him, imagine what he can and will do for those who acknowledge and turn to him. Imagine the Love that God shows to those who fear him...
3. Paul meets people where they are at and shows how the hopes and dreams of that culture or society are fulfilled only in Jesus. He doesn't talk about the law of Moses and how they should be moral or how they're failing to be moral. He hits them where they're at. They are under the tyranny of these false god's that never give and only take.... similar to many of us. Maybe you don't care a one bit about religion or christianity or you think that morality is a culture construct, but I can guarantee you are living for something that doesn't satisfy, something that leaves you longing for more; something that is constantly taking but never giving you relief.. who will forgive you when you fail, who will catch you when you fall... the thing that you are living for cannot die for you or forgive your failures but it will

destroy you if you fail it. Contrast that with Jesus, the living God, who humbled himself by becoming a man - who's whole earthly life and career is one huge act of selfless service for the lives of those who do not care about him or even recognize his greatness. He literally gave his life for you. He took your punishment and my punishment on the cross. The one who created you, and everything good in your life, gave his life for you so you could be forgiven and set free from serving vain things that will never satisfy.

3. Endure the hardness

1. After Paul's rushed message some Jews from the neighboring town show up and convince the people to stone Paul... amazingly he lives and when he gathers himself together he goes back into the city. From there Barnabas and he head to the city of Derbe and then they return home visiting all the churches where they formerly ministered the Gospel. And this is their word of encouragement to all the churches - **"continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."** We know there are so many today that are trying to rewrite history, to leave a foul stain upon the followers of Jesus. Some of these accusations are sadly true while others are grossly exaggerated and some are plain lies. But here is what people cannot deny - the power of an individual, faithfully following Jesus through whatever life will throw at us. This is an incredible witness. We can show how the gospel equips us to do life well in all circumstances... this becomes such a powerful witness to the power of the Gospel and the preciousness of Jesus.
2. Peter in his first epistle writes to Christians suffering trials and persecutions because of their faith - **"Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."** Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you

should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil."

3. One of the things that reached many of the pagans of the first century was the way that the early Christians endured suffering, the way they loved and served their enemies, the way in which they were committed to peace, the way they esteemed the value of every human being, sick, young old, lame, blind maimed. They didn't see hardships as accidental or hap hazard, they accepted them with patience, and trusted that God was in control and using it for their good and his glory. They accepted their deaths bravely, and they didn't threaten as they were tortured and persecuted...When we hold fast to our faith - to faithfully following and representing Jesus - we do the same. This is a huge testimony to those around us... when we trust God and claim he is still good in spite of our circumstance, when we bear witness through our own wounds to the man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief, who, when he was attacked, did not retaliate - but for gave his oppressors and executioners - we show the world something that no other religion can touch, that secularism cannot produce or explain and that is that Jesus Christ alone can give us a faith, hope and love that cannot be broken.... So may God give us the grace to endure hardships and hardness of life well, as witnesses of his grace and power.

4. Speak to the longings

1. When Paul heals the man the people proclaim that the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men. they call Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes because he was the one preaching. What's going on here? Well, History says, that fifty years prior to this incident the Latin Poet Ovid had narrated an ancient local legend. The supreme god Zeus, and his son Hermes once visited the hill country of Phrygia, disguised as mortals they went to a thousand homes seeking hospitality and shelter, and yet were sent away. At last they

were offered lodging in a tiny cottage of a poor elderly man and his wife, who entertained them out of their poverty. Later these gods rewarded them but destroyed by flood the homes which would not take them in.

1. So the people here at Lystra don't want to make the same mistake as the people of Phrygia - they want the blessing of the gods.
2. Now in one sense the people are flat out wrong -The gods have not come down, Paul and Barnabas are mortal men, but in another sense their longings and hopes are correct... God, the one true God, did come down in the likeness of men- The God-man Jesus Christ and though there was not even decent home or inn for him to be received into at his birth, and though for most of his life he lived a life of being despised, rejected and misunderstood - he did not call down fire, or bring a flood of judgment, but instead he took our judgment so that we might receive blessing and eternal goodness from the one true God, so that we might dwell with God forever in perfect peace and bliss.
3. Sometimes the longings of our culture are not wrong but misguided, and Christians we have this amazing opportunity to make these bridges and connections to people's longings and show how they are only fulfilled in and through Jesus
 1. The gospel fulfills our deepest longings of solid identity, true acceptance, unending love, freedom and infinite joy, and in our witness to the culture around us that doesn't believe in God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, or even the spiritual world we can still appeal to the heart longings of each person.
 2. "Whatever people say about God - whether they ignore him, deny him, hate him, or scorn him - we always know two things about them: first, they themselves are made in the image of God; and second, that they are living in God's reality. So whatever they claim, we can be sure that there is both truth and falsehood in their belief, and the tension can be found somewhere....As we talk and the conversation goes deeper, there will be a point at which the fact of the tension goes beyond providing us with a meeting point and becomes a pressure point. It then reveals where the treasure of the

person's heart is and where their beliefs clash with the safeguarding of their treasure.." -Os Guinness

3. This should give us a strong confidence that God's truth will resonate with people as we show how Jesus is the true fulfillment of their heart's desire, though they themselves don't know it yet...
 4. We've talked about this many times before but we must connect our city's or our culture's idols or meta-narrative to Jesus and show how the plot-lines of their lives can only find resolutions or happy endings in Jesus. We need to show how the main promises secular culture makes regarding meaning, satisfaction, freedom, and identity can't be fulfilled apart from Christ. We must retell the culture's story in Jesus. Introducing Broken people to the one that carried all the pain and suffering of the world, and was broken - not because of his own faults but because of the faults of others, He was broken for them. Introducing the poor to the one who became poor so that ultimately and eternally they can become rich. Introducing those who have never been loved or accepted to the one who was despised and rejected so they can be ultimately loved and accepted by God their true Father.
2. So what are the idols or meta-narratives of Sonoma county and how is Jesus the answer to the hopes and longings of our city and culture? It is the church's mission to make these connections to contextualize the gospel for our city.
 1. Equality for all - yes every human being has value and worth because they have been made in the image of God and exist for the supreme goal of glorifying him through simply being image bearers who do the work of cultivating the earth. Or talk about God's gracious welcome, forgiveness, redemption, salvation, adoption, justification and glorification to any and all who would trust in Jesus, not just the righteous and religious but the rebellious and irreligious.. talk about equality
 2. Peace - the God who comes himself to make peace by the work of his cross to reconcile us to himself, to one another, to ourselves and to nature. he does this by giving filling us up with his love and approval so we don't need to look to anyone else for it, we don't need to fight for it or prove ourselves...

3. Unfailing Love - the offer to be fully known, even our deepest darkest sins, warts and all, yet still be loved and accepted by someone. The promise that no matter how we may fail - Jesus will never leave us, he will never give up on us...
4. Freedom and the pursuit of happiness... the invitation in the gospel to find true freedom in becoming what you were created to be...a dearly loved child of God...
5. Greatness and Potential - Yes, you are an image bearer of the almighty everlasting God, you were created to be a king or queen over the cosmos and in Christ you are brought back on track to God's plan for humanities greatness and flourishing...In him you have a hope that all that you do in this life is not left to ultimately be destroyed or for nothing when you die, but works for an eternal treasure and glory that nothing in this world can compare with...

I believe that Christianity alone resonates with and answers the heart longings of humanity.

C.S. Lewis once said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

May God give us grace, and power to testify to the truth of the Gospel through our words and deeds.