

Dec. 17, 2017

Lesson 3: Faith to Persevere

Scripture: Acts 14

Context:

Today we continue on with Paul and Barnabas as they take their itinerant ministry across Asia Minor. In today's lesson, we shift in and out of the narrative of chapter fourteen in which Paul and Barnabas face both success and persecution in their ministry. Both experiences strengthen them as they continue to move to several cities throughout chapter fourteen including Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. In the verses before this section, we read of Paul and Barnabas returning to the synagogue in Iconium where Jews and Gentiles start to become believers. Yet, there is contention and there are those who split between the established Jewish leaders and the apostles. Both the Gentile and Jewish leaders attempt to stone them causing Paul and Barnabas to flee to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia.

It is at Lystra that Paul and Barnabas find a crippled man. Paul commands the man to get up and to walk. The healing causes the people of Lystra to rejoice in their presence and believe that the gods are among them. The priest of Zeus hears and brings out the garlands and oxen to celebrate the gods in their midst. Paul and Barnabas are both quick to point that the praise belongs not to them, but to Jesus, who is the one that their sacrifices are to belong.

Yet, just as the crowds begin to restrain, Jews from Antioch and Iconium rush forward and disperse other news about these messengers. Paul, who once helped in stoning Christians, now becomes the object of scorn. He is stoned and is left for dead. But apparently he's playing opossum! After the disciples surround him, he revives and comes back into the city. The next day he gets up and goes with Barnabas for Derbe.

They continue to proclaim news in Derbe, making more disciples and then actually return back to the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch where they tell the people to remain firm in their faith. They prophesy about persecutions and the difficulty that is a part of being in God's Kingdom. They can testify; they've endured that pain and know first hand that doing what God has called them to do isn't the most popular thing to do. With prayer and fasting, they appoint elders for those churches and move on. Paul and Barnabas move on to the next place that God has called them to go.

There are several reasons that these accounts are included. Throughout Acts, the church is defining its identity and how God is present with them each step of the way. Some of the story is incredible such as God using Paul and Barnabas to heal the man in Lystra. Other parts are less inspiring such as being stoned and left for dead. Throughout it all, the stories of the church are being told. According to the writer of Acts, any church that preaches the Word, that dares to challenge the status quo, that refuses to accept the political arrangements as eternal, convinced of the truth of its message, and is willing to suffer for God will grow.¹ It is found in the story of these churches in Antioch, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe and it is found in the witnessing of Paul and Barnabas.

¹ William H. Willimon, "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1988), 127.

Application:

There are several things that help us learn from these churches and from Paul and Barnabas' story. As we read them, we see our stories intertwine and see just as God was with the apostles in the start of their ministry, God is in our ministries as well.

When I first read this text I thought about the joy that Paul and Barnabas must have felt in going on their journey and preaching. They heard the crowds chant their names which they corrected pointing back to Christ. Yet, just as quick as they had crowds, they had antagonists and the crowds turned on them. The easy thing to do would be to quit and to walk away and believe that God was done there. Yet, Paul and Barnabas kept going.

To me, Paul and Barnabas reveal what makes great leaders. They are resilient and know that the words they speak and decisions that they make won't always make people happy. Yet, they continue with their call and do so even for that one person for whom that change made all the difference like the crippled man at Lysrtra or the cities that were in need of hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ. They see the good that's around them even in the midst of those who seem eager to control and even kill them. It is a reminder to us all that being a Christian means focusing on more of the positive than the negative that's taking place around us. God will be with us in those hard places.

We also hear a lot about humility in the stories of Paul and Barnabas. As they are revered and have those who attempt to treat them as God, they reject it and point the people back to Jesus. How many times do we as Christians step back and point back to God for our gifts and graces? And how many times do we inhibit others when we don't allow them to share their gifts for ministry? I think another sign of a good leader is knowing when to step up and sit down. In the case of being a Christian, it also means reflecting on the fact that not everything is about us.

The last thing that I think we can glean from this text is to think about our leaders and other churches and how we are called to support one another. One of the things that I love about our conference is our Cares and Concerns page on our conference web-site. Each day we are encouraged to pray for different churches and different clergy. For those whom I am close to, I always send a text not only saying that I prayed for them, but for the fact that I am grateful that God sent me such a wonderful brother or sister in Christ and the impact they've had on me.

The fact of the matter is that we may never know what our brothers or sisters are facing and we are called to pray for one another, to love one another, and to help each other when things are tough. Going back to our first point about resiliency is the fact that many times leaders face criticism and attacks from within their own congregations. After a while, it takes a toll on their souls, their families, and those around him. So before you attack the pastor, or complain to your DS, think about that pastor as a human; someone's son or daughter, wife or husband, brother or sister, friend or cousin. Think of them as a fragile child of God just like you who also serves Christ our Lord.

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Associate Pastor
First United Methodist Church
1380 W. Main St.

Dothan, AL 36301
Office (334) 793-3555 ext. 240
E-mail: hunter@fumcdothan.org

