

Dec. 10, 2017

Lesson 2: Faith to Discern

Scripture: Acts 13: 1-12

Context:

The second part of our lesson moves on to a later part of the church's history. In the Book of Acts, Saul's journeys reveal the spread of the early church throughout the Mediterranean. As the history book of the Christian church, each story or journey answers questions about what the early church faced in its formation. If you read close enough, you see certain themes and answers to questions that are behind the text.

For the Book of Acts, the question that took major theological and literary skill to answer was, "Will the *gentiles* be saved?"¹ Those who were in the early church and of Jewish descent already knew the answer to that question of the Jewish people as God had made a covenant with them. But what were they to do with the pagans in their community? Would they be saved? Throughout Acts and the early church this was a huge question and concern.

The scripture lesson today starts with Saul and Barnabas at the church in Antioch. A flashback to chapter eleven shows us that it is here where Saul is taken after his conversion and where Barnabas is sent to evangelize. Antioch is the first place where disciples are called Christians.² From what we gather in chapter eleven, Antioch is the place to be as Christians grow in their walk with Christ and one another.

As time goes on though, it appears that this church full of prophets and teachers need to share their wealth of knowledge and their gifts in other places. As such, the book records the Holy Spirit calling for two of them to go and to be commissioned to travel. Barnabas and Saul are sent on a wide itinerary that include Seleucia, Cyprus, Salamis, and Paphos, places that are far from their home based in Antioch. They are the first itinerant ministers sent to go to places they've never been before.

Their journey to Paphos leads them to meet a man named Bar-Jesus, a Jew who was a "prophet" and practiced sorcery. He was in the retinue of the proconsul Sergius Paulus, a Roman authority for that region. Back in those days, the sophisticated and affluent Romans used to keep sorcerers and astrologers around because they appeared to know it all and even had the magical words and tricks and were skilled enough to help the consul make important decisions.³ While everything might have been fine if Bar-Jesus (Elymas) had allowed them to speak, he chose to go against them trying to steer the governor away from the faith. He chose the wrong people to oppose.

Saul (Paul), full of the Holy Spirit, glares at Bar-Jesus and admonishes him saying that he attacks anything that is good. As such he will be blind. Once everything happens, the governor believes as he is astonished by both the teaching and the act that just took place. Falling in line with the theme of conversion and Gentiles coming to the faith, the governor becomes a Christian despite this Bar-Jesus who has attempted to speak for God

¹ William H. Willimon, "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1988), 93.

² Acts 11: 26; NRSV.

³ Willimon, "Acts," 123.

and to silence those who spoke about Christ as Lord. Once again, a new believer comes into this circle of Christians who are diverse in age, background, race, and social class.

Application:

False prophets are not often the topic of conversation in most our churches or households. Whenever we think of prophets, we imagine those who tell the truth and those who predict the future. Sometimes people listen to prophets, but often they are ignored and disregarded. False prophets are those who don't tell the truth as they pander to people and at times manipulate God for human purposes. Throughout scripture, we hear of the Bar-Jesuses in both the Old and New Testaments who try to make God into their own image. We might think of Bar Jesus as someone who was good at manipulating people and would probably use his gifts for his own advantage and well-being.

As I thought about "false prophets" in today's world I thought about all the different people who claim to speak for God. My experience is that whenever we try to speak for God, we often miss the point. God is God and speaks for God's self. Jesus himself was God and is the way, the truth, and the life. Whenever I hear that people want to "bring back God into our schools" through prayer in public school, or that "we need God to turn our nation" around by putting up monuments and blocking those of other faiths from entering the political arena, I can't help but think that does not sound like the Lord and the disciples I hear about in scripture. God is all around us and is doing things all around us. God doesn't need us to impose God's name anywhere. Those who run on those platforms have a martyr complex, one that make them the Lord of all instead of God who has always reigned and will always reign.

I also think in this passage about the gentile, Sergius Paulus. Here is a man who sounds like those who are outside the church. He is smart, affluent, and is probably curious about the faiths and the religions of those around him. While he has Bar-Jesus in his courts and is intrigued by him, it is Barnabas and Saul whose words and actions lead him to the faith. However, they do not see it as credit to themselves. They see this as the Lord's doing and teaching. They are but servants to our God. They teach and preach the Good News and leave the rest to God in what happens. They show us an example of servant hood that reminds us that our job is not to shove God down peoples' throats, but to be in ministry with them.

I once had a retired Bishop as a professor at Vanderbilt who told me that people outside the church are not always listening to our sermons or seeing our billboards, but are watching who we follow and how we treat others who are different from us in all sorts of ways. Oftentimes, our actions speak louder than our words. If we say that God has commanded us to love one another just as he loves us, how does that mean we treat people who are different than us in word and deed. If we say that God is the God of all nations, how does that mean we see national borders and even those of different religions. If we say that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, how does that affect how we should get along with others not just in our churches and our communities.

The scripture passage today teaches us that we are to be servants of our Lord and that the false prophets are those who use God to only advance themselves in this life. May our prayer be that God gives us the discernment to trust our God and to look for those in leadership who are motivated by service and love instead of power and hate.

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