

Sermon Text for August 11, 2019

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 31:25-32, Acts 14:8-18

“A case of mistaken identity”

It has been a tragic week for us again here in our country. In our young adult Sunday School class we are starting a series called: “What does the Bible say about...” and we are addressing topics that are fraught with controversy and disagreements from abortion and homosexuality to gun violence to the more tame of family and children and social media. As a class we wanted to see how does our faith dictate how we act. How does the Bible, which for us is an authority beyond any other authority which we may have, dictate to us what we ought to believe, and so how we ought to act. If Scripture contradicts a stance that we have say on immigration, where Scripture tells us, commands us, to welcome the stranger, then how can we justify a stance Biblically that builds walls and separates children from families. If there is a justification according to Scripture, we will find it. If there is not, then we will be forced to say that we may believe this, but it is against Scripture.

My hope is that over time we will become more and more aware of what we believe and how that belief is shaped by Scripture and how our faith is shaped by that very same Scripture. From the beginning of the church 2,000 years ago nature has been used as an apologetic tool to convince non-believers that God exists. Paul and Barnabas today are still on their first missionary journey and they use the beauty of the earth as proof of God’s existence as they address the crowds of non-believers in Lystra. But have you noticed that every place that Paul and Barnabas have gone they have been kicked out. In chapter 13 they get kicked out of Antioch, then in chapter 14 Iconium, and here today immediately after our verses they get kicked out of Lystra.

Last week they faced a group of complainers who were passed over because they were used to their entitlement and didn’t like the good news because the good news meant that they were held accountable and had to accept a whole new group of people into God’s kingdom. Today they face a crowd of pagan idol worshippers in what seems like a comical series of events to us, but not to Paul and Barnabas who find themselves in a case of mistaken identity.

READ SCRIPTURE

A few months back I challenged you to pray for the specific healing of an individual and that on September 1 we would have a service of celebration and healing. Here is my person that I am praying for, little Oliver, he continues to struggle and heal and struggle and heal. Any day that he is not in the hospital is a victory. But we will be sharing more on the 1st. If you could let me know if you would be willing to share in the service that would be ideal. You don't want to hear me speak about healings and ways in which God has worked in your life, I think we would rather hear from you. Let this serve as a reminder to continue praying for that person that you have identified, and pray for them constantly. Let me know if you will share, I'll start writing a list of people who are willing and I'll contact you. It doesn't have to be long.

Today we have another miracle story where from one moment to the next a man is an invalid to the next moment he jumps up and walks around. Look at the beginning verses that we looked at today. There is a man crippled from birth. Verse 9 states that he was listening to Paul, but Paul looked at him, stared at him intently. When was the last time that we saw Paul look at someone intently? It really wasn't that long ago. Chapter 13, vs. 9 when he is faced with the magician who is competing with him he stares him down and calls him the son of the devil.

When Paul stares at someone, look out, even here, he stares at the man, notices he has the faith he needs, and he heals him. Now he heals him not in a very subtle way like Jesus does. Remember how Jesus heals? He goes up and says: Let's keep this between the two of us okay? Don't tell anyone else what happened.

No, here Paul in vs. 10 says in a loud voice, get up on your feet. The man sprang up and began to walk. Not very subtle at all and so the crowd that has gathered to hear Paul speak sees this miracle and goes wild. Unfortunately for Paul and Barnabas they spoke a different language and so were excited because the people were shouting out what to them were obvious praises to God or so they thought.

If they only knew that the people were giving them, Paul and Barnabas, all the credit to the point where in vs. 11 the people cry out: The gods have come down to us in human form. Well, almost, close. What do you think Paul and Barnabas have been preaching? I would guess about Jesus Christ and how God had come in the flesh through Christ, born of the virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, but then on the third day he rose again. This Jesus was God whom we worship and in whom we put our trust.

So, yes, God has come in human form, but not in the form of Paul and Barnabas, but in the form of Jesus.

They named Barnabas and Paul Zeus and Hermes, remember the two of them are absolutely clueless about all of the excitement and the activity that was going on around them. They probably thought that they had won the people over on the side of Christ because of the miracle that took place. Zeus was considered the father of the gods, there was even a temple with a priest for him. Hermes, he was the messenger of the gods and talked all the time so they called Paul that. Obviously Luke who wrote Acts thought Paul was a bit of a big mouth. I'm not making this up, that is what it says in verse 12 that Paul talked a lot.

There is a tale from Ovid the storyteller in *Metamorphoses* that Zeus and Hermes came and visited an elderly couple without them knowing who it was very close to Lystra and because they received them so wonderfully, they were greatly rewarded. The citizens of Lystra would have known this tale that would have been old even for them, so it is no wonder that after seeing the miracle they were ready to receive and worship these two men, if they treated them nicely then they would be in turn rewarded.

The priest and the people, unknown to Paul and Barnabas, bring out the oxen, the garlands of flowers, and get ready to make sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. It is at this point where Paul and Barnabas probably get that sinking feeling that something is not right. Uh, oh, They aren't, they don't, no, not us, don't worship us we are not gods, no. Stop, stop, but they had a hard time getting them to stop it says at the end of these verses in vs. 18. People want someone to follow, they want to have faith that there is someone who is going to lead them and guide them. It must have been tempting for Paul and Barnabas to sit back and take it all in.

Sting.

It is so nice and it is so very tempting to take credit for things you really haven't done. Dramatic healings and events are sure to draw a crowd in Lystra or on Sunday morning television, but for all the wrong reasons. It is much more secure offering allegiance to someone you can see and hear, as opposed to God who is nebulous and only understood through the one who tells you about Him. This is true for some people.

Bearer's of Christ's power are always in danger of being mistaken as the sources of power in themselves. One can dangerously confuse saving power with its conduit. The same thing happens in Acts 10:25-26 with Peter and Cornelius. I don't care what

field you work in or what you are currently involved in, this can happen. The church is an example of where people are quick to take credit. First Presbyterian is at a very exciting time in its life, not because of any one pastor, or musician, or any other person, but because of God. But it is so tempting to take the credit.

The same is true in our work, and in our lives. The more we see things going well, the more likely we are to look at ourselves for answers, to give ourselves credit and being ready to rely upon ourselves more and more and upon God less and less until you find yourself in trouble and alone because you've forgotten how to call upon God's name because we have been calling upon our name for all of this time.

God without a doubt uses us and has used First Presbyterian church. He has chosen us to carry out the mission, but if we didn't do it, God's mission would be carried out by someone else. We can celebrate, and we ought to enjoy the thrill that comes with knowing that God is using us.

This section ends with Paul and Barnabas explaining that this is a case of mistaken identity. The healing and everything else that takes place is for the sake of what we hear in vs. 15. That you should turn from these worthless things to the living God. When we go through our lives relying upon ourselves I don't think we realize that we are really relying upon a worthless thing. What, are we worthless? In relationship with what and who God is, yes. We are not worthless in the sense that God can and does use us if we are open for God to use us.

Let's follow the example of Paul and Barnabas and allow ourselves to succumb to the living God in Jesus Christ who calls us to shed our self reliance and to focus upon his presence and his might in all that we do. Amen.