

MAY 14 Worthless idols vs the Living God

Acts 14

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Have you ever heard the phrase, “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything”? It sounds so noble, so courageous, doesn’t it? But after reading Acts 14, I’ve decided it’s terrible advice. What if, for instance, you stood firmly for the idea that, say, mother’s day should be banned instead of celebrated? (Happy Mother’s Day Mums, BTW!) Or what if you stood for the idea that the abstract universe or Buddha or Muhammad or even Hermes or Zeus as we see in this chapter were running our lives?

Or that there is no such thing as absolute truth or a narrative beyond our own lives? I was in Sydney a few weeks ago and saw two Australian plays, visited the MCA and perused the bookstores and news agencies. Most of what I saw was a ‘devotion’ to self. No sense of redemption or compassion or anything beyond ‘finding your own meaning for your own success’ or more crassly, doing what you want to ‘stick it to the man.’ Lots of passion and conviction everywhere. But not much, hope. Or Truth. Or compassion.

So acting on your conviction might be admirable and don’t get me wrong, every human with well-meaning beliefs deserves our respect. But as Ian said a few weeks ago, you can be sincere in what you believe and still be wrong. Many believed Hitler was right about nationalism, and because of that stand thousands never had the chance even to fall for anything.

In other words, standing for something—take your pick in our “secular” age—so you don’t fall for anything is just silly; it might be a noble sounding mantra but it puts our focus in the wrong place. Yes, we’re wired to stand for or worship some thing or some idea/person/you name it. We’re created to believe. And we all will, no matter how outrageous or sincere our devotion. As James Smith said in his book, “You Are What you Love”, “What a person loves, and how he or she loves, will determine the course and character of life, as well as the condition of society.” So The question this morning is What (or Who) will we love? What will we choose to stand for??

That’s the same tension we see in Acts 14. The cast of characters and belief options is as wide ranging for Paul and the early church as it is today: some in this chapter stand for their own self interests, some for religious fundamentalism, some go with whatever the crowd does while others believe what sounds good in the moment. And yet. Some chose to stand for the enduring truth of Jesus Christ the Risen Lord. No matter what it cost them. And we, too, have

the opportunity to believe *in* and stand for—even LOVE—that Someone known as Jesus Christ. When we do, we *won't* fall for the gods and idols of this age, because we will know the Source of the abundant life Jesus promises in John 10:10. And that will spill over into our communities and culture and we'll become, as Mark says about this passage, a missionary in a secular age.

So let's look more closely at Acts 14 and the helpful insights it provides for living in a diverse culture. 3 things in particular: 1. the Gospel is disruptive, 2. The Gospel brings discernment and 3. the Gospel is delightful. Each of these together, the disruption, discernment and delight of the Gospel, define what happens when we walk the Christian journey and the ripple effect it has on others.

First, the disruption of the Gospel.

Why are Paul and Barnabus so persistent in introducing the life and message of Jesus to Jews and Gentiles, so much so that they don't stop doing it? Even when the Jews poison the minds of the crowds, or even after Paul and Barnabus are run out of town, the Jewish leaders still come after them, look at v 19. And then in v. 21: And when they've preached the gospel to that city and made disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, the very places that had run them out of town!

So why don't Paul and Barnabus stop 'disrupting' others with the Gospel? What is it about Jesus that so motivates them to risk everything so that people can hear the Good News, which is what Gospel means? Why are these Jewish leaders so threatened by the apostles? Was it that Jesus is radical, or counter cultural, so unlike anything the world has ever seen, that he turned everything upside down for them? I think so.

I mean consider how Jesus daily challenged/disrupted the status quo of the Pharisees whenever he taught or healed on the Sabbath. How he radically affirmed women in a very male dominated culture that called women 'dogs', unfit for religious instruction and couldn't even testify in a court of law. Or how Jesus invited children when they were otherwise ignored, and how he took time out for those who were marginalized, sick or poor, to give them dignity. The King of Israel—who many thought would usher in his Kingdom with force—was called the Prince of Peace. He was everything they did not expect in a Messiah—especially because he spent time with those who could never help him conquer an army as he built his upside Kingdom.

In other words everything about Jesus disrupted everyone's thinking and comfortable lives—and still does! I love how Dorothy L. Sayers described Christ's disruption for the disciples:

“They had misunderstood practically everything Christ had ever said to them, but no matter; the thing made sense at last (in the resurrection) and the meaning was far beyond anything they had dreamed. They had expected a walkover, and they beheld a victory; they had expected an earthly Messiah, and they beheld the Soul of Eternity. They had seen the face of the living God turned upon them; and it was the face of a suffering rejoicing Man.”—Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Triumph of Easter”

So this Christ whom Paul preaches in Acts 14—this Jesus born in a dirty barn, who walked on water and made the blind see, this man executed for crimes he never committed and who some how became un-dead to walk the earth again for 40 days as a man, *This* Jesus challenged all the ideas people ever had about the Savior of the world. See, when we meet the Jesus of Scripture, everything we've ever known or believed about life and ourselves, well, is disrupted in a really good way. Like the dream we've always hoped would come true and then does!

So this disruption—which Paul knew about intimately— is the best kind of disruption. It's the kind where wrongs are righted, where loneliness turns to belonging and hopelessness turns into mission/purpose. In fact the message and life of the Apostles in the early church is all about disruption because encountering the risen Jesus changes everything. We care about others in ways we never thought possible. We serve at times when we don't really want to. We love and meet people we would never have expected to—and call them family! But if you don't want your life to change or you don't want to grow or experience love or everlasting life, then don't let the Good News of the Gospel disrupt you.

That was Paul's issue as we learn in Acts chapter 9. When he went by the name of Saul, he'd been so angry that all he wanted to do was kill Christians. Kill anyone who threatened to disrupt his way of life. He even stood by as the Apostle Stephen was murdered, and he applauded. But Jesus had other plans for him. He knew Saul longed for a better way and met him on the road to Damascus. Yes, when Saul was en route to destroy more Christians, The Risen Jesus levelled him, blinded him and said, “Saul Saul why do you persecute me?” Talk about a fantastic disruption of love, one that affected millions of people!

Saul—whose new identity became Paul—listened to Jesus, turned from his evil deeds and got trained. He learned that God’s kingdom and reign covers every square inch of our world and requires we see things through the lens of Christ’s love.

So Gospel Disruption Leads to Discernment. Saul was so shaken up by Christ’s forgiveness—and that’s key—that he saw everything differently. And this chapter is a great example of his discernment, that is, the ability to read and judge the situation with wisdom/integrity. Paul sees what’s happening in a culture of many beliefs and knows the right thing to say and do at the right time.

Now this is the first time in Acts that Paul and Barnabus are referred to as apostles which signals God’s call on their life, as Christ-like leaders. Let’s look at all the viewpoints they’re up against in the chapter: we’ve got a “great number of Jews and Greeks who have believed the Gospel (v1)” (Young Christians). Then we’ve got some Jews showing blatant unbelief—who poison the minds of the Gentiles against the ”brothers” (v. 2), and who then persuade the crowds to stone Paul and drag him outside the city to die in v. 19. The crowd itself is so fickle they go from believing Paul’s message one minute and wanting to worship him and Barnabus, to trying to kill him the next. That’s because fickleness is the opposite of discernment. When you’re fickle, you do fall for anything. It’s not hard to see the complete lack of discernment in the crowd here, believing anything as long as it tickles their ears.

But then we have Paul and Barnabus, firm in who they are as Christ-Followers, even staying longer in Iconium to “Speak boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by *their* hands.” V 3 Look at Paul’s discernment and flexibility: First he discerns some are willing to listen, then that the situation is dangerous so he needs to leave, then that the crippled man has faith enough to be healed in v 9, and finally that the pagan crowd needs a different approach to hearing the Gospel, v 15. This crowd doesn’t know Jewish history so instead he appeals to the common grace of God in v. 17: “God 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.” ALL of our provision, for believer or non believer, is a gift from God!

But notice this: The Lycaonians had believed the myth of Zeus and Hermes for a long time. Even when they saw a miracle happen, *their idea of who God was didn’t change*. They transferred their belief onto Paul and Barnabas and called them gods. The miracle merely attracted attention, but they needed grounding.

That's why Paul also discerns that when people's lives are disrupted with the Gospel, it requires perseverance and longevity and stick to it-ness. V 3 says Paul and Barnabus remain *a long time* to speak boldly, again and again, of the Crucified/Resurrected Lord, to bear witness to the word of his grace. God then also leads Paul to know which churches to build up and when, which we see at the end of the chapter.

In other words, this kind of discernment means he can read the situation through the lens of the Gospel, through the intimacy of his life-changing relationship with the Savior of the world. Paul saw beyond the selfish narratives and shallow beliefs to the truth of life with Christ. He was no longer “conformed to the pattern of this world, but was transformed by the renewing of his mind.”

When your life is disrupted by the Gospel, as Paul's clearly was, you cannot help but tell others about him. If you're hesitant to talk to talk about Jesus in a natural way, maybe you haven't been disrupted enough. Maybe the Gospel is just a nice value system to some—but if it's not worth risking everything for, maybe we haven't fully understood the gravity of Christ's death and resurrection for us, as Paul clearly had! When Christ—who is GOD and DOES have the right—disrupts our lives, it shapes everything about us—from how we deal with money to what we say to our neighbours or how we serve at work.

So every corner of Paul's life and every inch of how he saw the world was grounded in the Person of Truth in Jesus Christ, in God's word. He wasn't like the waves of the sea—as the crowds were—tossed to and fro, like the people who one minute praised Paul and the next minute tried to murder him. Christ's disruption of Paul's life gave him the discernment he'd need for the mission God called him to.

And it's the same for us. As we continually ask God to 'disrupt' our lives in prayer, through scripture, in community with each other, and in worship and service, our stand for Jesus is clearer and more compassionate than we could ever conjure up on our own.

I remember hearing once that the way the FBI trained its agents to discover counterfeit money, was not by studying counterfeits, but by studying real dollar bills! Discernment comes when you're so convinced of God's Truth/voice as the 'real' thing, that you recognize a counterfeit any time it pops up.

And the more we 'study' Jesus, allowing him to disrupt our lives, the more delighted

we'll be in him. When we bask in God's grace over and over, the more everything in this world pales in comparison. Our hearts are melted, satisfied with seeing his Face. And like a child imitates her parents, we become like him. We take on the family resemblance! We discern when things aren't the way God our Father intended—so when we see someone bullied, we intervene. When we see injustice in the world, no matter what it costs, we're moved to care and try to right the wrongs as an ambassador of God's Grace. We offer stories of redemption and forgiveness to a needy world because we know—like Paul—*whose* we are.

And because he is our delight, we are not moved. He is the source of our joy and the more we're with Jesus, the more we *want* to be with him each day. As we spend time with him, we begin to see that life is about much more than playing for the weekend, that there's a bigger picture going on, and we discern the deeper gifts and plans of God. THIS is not all there is! We are not swayed by the slippery slope of the culture, by the greed and shallowness of our age because we know there's more. There's deep joy in Jesus. Forever.

Such delight is what gets you through the hardships. It's what convinced Paul so much that he endured stoning and got right back up to go back into the city and then travelled the world proclaiming the Lord's Good News!

Yes, Christ's claims made the authorities so uncomfortable, so threatened that rather than yield to him and believe—like Paul, Barnabus and the crippled man—they crucified him instead.

And it will not be easy for us either when we stand with and for Jesus in an age that seems uninterested and at times antagonistic. But for Paul and Christ's church, nothing else mattered but telling others about Christ's forgiveness, pointing others to the same Source of joy and peace and hope they experienced, caring deeply for others so to won some. Paul knew that the idols of this world could never satisfy or delight us in the way we're made to be satisfied and delighted—with Christ alone. Do we know that? DO we point others to Him? Are we willing to be disrupted by God's love and then be a part of the disruption of Good News for others?

We're all wired to believe something, what will you believe? Who will you love? Will you be anchored in Christ's amazing love whenever the culture pulls at you? Will you persevere with Him? Will you stand with the Once Dead, Now Alive Jesus so that others might delight in Him?

Let's pray.