

Gods in Boxer Shorts: Running from Idolatry
Acts 14: 8-18

This story in Acts is ripe with humor, but it makes a serious point: There is only one true and living God—and it's not us! Paul and Barnabus exhibit a true humanity and humility by turning away from the worship of the crowd in Lystra.

It reminds me of a certain former Dallas cowboys head coach. His wife filed for divorce, citing religious differences: he thought he was God, and she disagreed.

I

Paul and Barnabas had entered the town of Lystra. As Paul was preaching, his sermon caused faith to arise in a man who had been crippled from birth. Paul perceived that the crippled man had faith to be healed and said to him in a loud voice: "Stand up straight on your feet!". The man sprang up and began to walk. We can be crippled in all kinds of ways and new faith can get us back on our feet again.

Well, when the crowds saw what happened they shouted out: "The gods have come to us in human form!" They called Barnabas *Zeus* and Paul *Hermes*, because he was the talker of the two.

Amid this religious frenzy, a priest of Zeus, from the nearby Zeus temple showed up with his portable Zeus Worship Wagon, bringing oxen for sacrifice and garlands of flowers.

It's a pretty heady experience to be worshipped and bask in the adoration of others.

There was a local legend, passed on later by Ovid, that may have been in the back of the minds of the townspeople. The legend told of the time Zeus and Hermes came to visit, incognito, disguised as ordinary humans. No one in the town offered them hospitality. No one except one poor older couple, Philemon and Baucis who took them in. The gods honored them by granting them their request, but they wiped out the rest of the town for their lack of hospitality.

When Paul and Barnabas showed up, did the citizens of Lystra remember the story and want to make sure they didn't blow it this time? The gods were pretty unpredictable in their emotions and sometimes capricious in their actions, so you had to be careful how you treated them.

II

The response of Paul and Barnabas to the crowd's worship of them was remarkable: *they showed their true integrity by their capacity to be horrified at the blasphemy of being taken for gods and become objects of worship.*

As a public act of humility and decrying these acts of blasphemy they did a proper Jewish thing: they tore their clothes! Zeus and Hermes in boxer shorts! Then they cried out: “See, we are mortals like you!” If their words didn’t convince the people of Lystra, perhaps the sight of their knobby knees and skinny legs would do the trick.

During the summer, some of the men here at Grace wear shorts to church. You may not know that this is a deeply religious act: they are making sure we do not confuse them as Greek gods. It’s a Paul and Barnabus thing.

Paul and Barnabas had the spiritual integrity to be dismayed by the worship of the people. Some traveling preachers might have preached, taken a big offering and skipped town with the loot.

I was at a James Taylor concert a number of years ago. After one song a female yelled out: “I love you, James!” Everyone in the hall could hear her. With humility uncharacteristic of rock stars, he said back: “It helps that you don’t know me.”

Years ago, when I was a pastor in Louisville, years after the end of his term as President, Jimmy Carter came to the graduation ceremony at Southern Seminary. His own pastor was receiving a Doctor of Ministry degree that day and President Carter was invited to take part in the ceremony. President Carter did

not wear the ornamental plumage of the academic cap, gown and hood. It's quite a sight! Instead he wore a modest grey business suit with everyday brown shoes. Then as 500 plus of the students crossed the stage to receive their degrees, he shook hands with everyone.

Here was a former United States President who taught Sunday School at his Georgia church every Sunday and who since leaving office had been most often pictured in work clothes and a carpenter's apron with a hammer in his hand, helping build Habitat for Humanity homes.

President Carter's modesty reminded me of our first President, George Washington, who after two terms voluntarily gave up political power because he felt holding onto that power would be bad for the republic. Not gods, mortals like us.

III

Paul and Barnabas pointed beyond themselves to the one true and living God, the creator of all that is. Paul began to preach again, and here is a one-minute recap of his sermon.

- 1) Why are you worshipping us? We are mortals like you, and we bring you good news from God.

- 2) The one God of us all has left all people evidence of God's goodness in Creation itself. God has been doing good all along—look at the rain from the heavens and the fruitful seasons, filling your bodies with food and your hearts with gladness. Our God is a good God, not to be feared.
- 3) This God has indeed come in human form in Jesus Christ.

It was a pretty good sermon, if you ask me, but it was not very successful. Our story ends:

“Even with these words they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifices to them!”

That's a little reassuring to this preacher, that even Paul's sermons were not always successful.

IV

What is it about us that causes us to be so easily seduced by one form of idolatry or another? John Calvin, the great Reformer, said that our human hearts are perpetual idol factories. We look for human figures to save us or rescue us. There is danger here and painful disappointment. One more god bites the dust.

Sometimes we prefer a god we can see to one we cannot see. God revealed God's self to Moses in a burning bush. Later he led the Hebrew people out of

slavery in Egypt. When they came to Mt. Sinai, Moses went up to the top of the mountain to talk with God. He was gone so long that his brother Aaron surrendered to the demands of the people, melted the gold trinkets they had brought with them and made a golden calf. The people started dancing around it. A God they could see and touch and hold. Frederick Buechner quipped that they, with all of us, thought “a god in the hand was worth two in the bush.”

We get hungry for god-substitutes. Roger Williams, the founder of the Baptist movement in America wrote:

The truth is, the great gods of this world are God-belly, God-peace, God-wealth, God-honour, God-pleasure, etc...

How would we describe the gods of this world today?

God-power

God-success

God-nation

God-race

God-wealth

What would you add?

An addiction recovery center has named four addictions that are at the core of all addictions:

- 1) Control
- 2) Sensation
- 3) Suffering
- 4) Security

We can become addicted to all four. Like all false gods, they promise pleasure but bring pain. They are the idols we reach for in hope of some kind of salvation.

V

So what about the Church Alive in the Spirit? What might this story teach us about the kind of church that is useful to God in God's redemption of the world?

First, I'd say that the Church Alive in the Spirit is the church that accepts its imperfect humanity without abandoning its high purpose. Being that church means having a humility about us, but not giving up on God's high calling—God's dream for us and God's dream for the world.

Paul writes of our high calling:

One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining for what lies ahead
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ
Jesus.

That call is to the increase in the love of God and neighbor. That call is to become the love of Christ to others.

We don't have to be perfect to be a part of all this. On the top of her piano, a piano teacher I knew had placed a small replica of the statue of the Venus de Milo, the statue whose arms had been lost centuries ago. The teacher would tell her pupils before a performance: "Look at her. You don't have to be perfect to be beautiful."

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.

Think about it: God has entrusted the treasure of the gospel to the crackable clay pots of the church! Maybe a crackable clay pot is better than a perfect golden vase because God's light can shine through our cracks.

Paul prayed over and over for what he called his "thorn in his flesh" to be removed. Those prayers were not answered. Instead God said to him:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

So God might be saying to us do not despise your human weakness. It can be used by God.

The church in the power of the Spirit is a humble church. A humble church does not strut, it serves. It points not to itself but to Christ. The Church's pride has sometimes gotten in the way of the gospel, but the Church is being humbled these days by shrinking numbers and shrinking cultural authority. But God may be better able to use us because of this. One of the biological signs of life is response to the environment. How shall we respond?

I've told you before that when the Archbishop of Canterbury was asked about the dramatically shrinking numbers in the Anglican church, what has been the result. He replied: "It has made us less bossy!"

The Church in the power of the Spirit knows it is not perfect in knowledge or goodness. It does not boss people around and pretend the authority of God. It's not afraid to show its knobby knees and skinny legs. It points to God.