

A Problem with Miracles

sermon digest

August 7, 2011

Acts 14:8-23

larry dipboye

Living during the time of Christ, the Roman poet Ovid contributed to Greek mythology the story of a visit from the gods Zeus and his son Hermes to earth disguised as humans. Zeus, the guardian of travelers, was particularly interested in the hospitality the people of Phrygia were showing to strangers. So the gods approached door after door of various houses, but no one had time or comfort for the shabby visitors. Finally, the gods came to a small cottage that belonged to an elderly couple Baucis and Philemon. They were welcomed inside and joyfully fed a meal from their meager supply of food. When the couple became suspicious that they might be entertaining someone special, they attempted to catch their pet goose to prepare for the visitors; but the bird took refuge in the arms of Zeus. Then, the gods dropped their disguises and commended their hosts. With their visitors the couple stepped outside the cottage to find that the surrounding land had become a lake swallowing up the selfish neighbors. Then, as they looked back, they found that their cottage had become a magnificent temple. Philemon and Baucis become priest and priestess of the Temple of Zeus where they lived happily ever after until their lives came to a simultaneous end as two interlocked trees.

Luke's story about the visit of Paul and Barnabas to Lystra takes place in the same geographical region of Ovid's myth. Paul's miraculous healing of a man who had never walked is reminiscent of similar events attributed to Jesus in the Gospels and to Peter at the gate of the Temple in Jerusalem. In a Jewish context, the connection of the miracle to Jewish theology was the natural conclusion. Of course, such a miracle could only have come from the God of creation. But in the pagan, Gentile world of Lystra, the miracle was associated with the Olympian gods. With Ovid's story in the background, the people of Lystra leaped to the conclusion that Paul and Barnabas were Hermes and Zeus returned to test the hospitality of the people. The local priest from the temple of Zeus got onboard with garlands and oxen to sacrifice to the gods—Paul and Barnabas. But in addition to the radical difference in the religious culture of Lystrans and the Jewish visitors, they seemed to have had significant problems with language. Paul was probably fluent in Hebrew and Greek but not in the local Lycaonian language. The total confusion of the subsequent events was the only part of the story that makes sense.

When it became apparent that they had become the objects of worship, Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes in offense with the blasphemy and rushed into the crowd declaring their identity: "We are mortals just like you." The sermon directed attention to the God "who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them."

Cultural roots are a critical part of religious judgment. Rule number one in crossing cultural borders of this world is that everyone in this world has a matrix, a background, historical roots, previous assumptions about religion, politics, and sociology. They don't have to be brainwashed or of exceptionally low or high intelligence to have a set opinion.

Paul's first missionary journey and venture into Gentile territory appears to have been a disaster resulting in maybe one convert, and it may have been included by Luke to provide significant data for the Jerusalem conference that was to follow. In the debate concerning the acceptance of Gentiles into the church, the Lystran episode seems to provide some justification of the Jewish faction that insisted on Gentile conversion to Judaism as a requisite for acceptance as Christians. What do you expect? People with absolutely no understanding of either the language, the culture, or the theology of Jews are not going to reason their way from miracle to Jesus to the God of creation. A major blunder in the Christian world mission emerges in this story. From the beginnings of Christian expansion in Acts, Christians have naively assumed that people from other cultures are sitting and waiting for our story and understanding of God's way with the world and that they have no story of their own to fill in the gaps of their knowledge and experience. Rigid missionaries have often gone into other cultures with the naive belief that they have the universally acceptable message; and all that is necessary to call other people and nations to repentance, that is, total religious change, is learning the language. The great nineteenth-century missionary expansion, second only to the story in Acts, carried a lot of cultural baggage into so-called "primitive" cultures. I do not believe for a moment that the Great Commission Christians in my own Christian heritage were malicious and

mean-spirited in their total rejection of other religions and cultures, but they tended to be far too naive about the perfection of Western culture and far too closely tied to the politics of colonial expansion. Missionaries often marched behind conquering armies and were associated with the victors of military conquest. The process of conversion was as much about changing the social and political furniture as about the change of heart and mind of the person.

Someone quipped about the successful expansion of Islam in Africa in the last century that Christians came with three Gods and one wife, while Muslims offered one God and many wives. In short, the Muslim culture of polygamy was more compatible with the African concept of family.

Sometimes the culture wins. Jesuit scholar Dean Béchard notes the learning curve between Lystra and Athens (Acts 17). In Lystra, Paul tore his clothes and chided the Lystrans for idolatry. In Athens, Paul stood before an empty pedestal dedicated to the unknown god and proclaimed the gospel based on the culture that was already there. He even quoted a Greek Stoic, “In him we live and move and have our being” (17:28), to direct attention to the God of creation. Although Paul was statistically more successful in Athens, he was rejected by some when he spoke of the resurrection of the dead, an offensive idea to the Platonic mind.

Béchard sees the primary difference between Lystra and Athens as the distinction between a rustic, rural audience and an intellectual, sophisticated one. Regardless of the native intelligence and sophistication of the audience, one common denominator stands out; every community, urban or rural, has its ways, and every culture provides a background for the religious understanding of events. Christians committed to a global mission must either reject, condemn, and change the culture or accept and adapt the culture to the Christian gospel. Paul took a step toward accommodation in Athens a direction that continued in the emergence of Christianity in the Constantinian era. Although Christianity ultimately prevailed over the pagan religions of Rome, the pagan culture maintained a foothold on the social landscape that never really disappeared. Whether from the family or national origin, culture always has a way of sticking.

I was among the panel of clergy gathered at the tv studio to record our weekly tv program in Louisville one Friday morning. For some reason the topic of interfaith marriage came up. I was rather surprised at my colleague and friend Rabbi Waller when he cornered me to appeal for support, “You don’t really believe that Christians and Jews should intermarry, do you?” With a chuckle that I did not intend to be insulting, I believed that perhaps more important considerations were at stake than religious differences. Some twenty-five years later, I have a better grasp of my friend’s concern. The Jews almost lost their culture in the world following the Nazi Holocaust. Herb saw what I have come to recognize that intermarriage always retains some of the cultural roots of both sides. Gradually, through conversion and marriage Christian denominations have blended into very similar institutions that no longer can be distinguished simply on theological grounds.

The problem may be in our miracles. Luke intended no such critique of the mission of Paul and Barnabas. He recorded the miraculous healing of the lame man to affirm the continuing power of the Holy Spirit in the church, even in the former persecutor of Christians, Paul. However, the miracle was badly misunderstood by the Lystrans. Perhaps the language was the difference, but I see more. These people had no basis to assume that a god other than Paul had effected the miracle before them. This was a case where miracle was less a revelation of the power and identity of God than a door to the most reprehensible blasphemy in Jewish thought—idolatry! Why wouldn’t they think that Paul was the magician here, and why wouldn’t they connect Paul and Barnabas to the myth of Ovid? They knew nothing of the Hebrew language much less of the Prophets or the revelations to Moses. What else should we expect from a pagan culture?

But the issue came down to the introduction of a God beyond the gods, a subject that seems to dominate the Psalms and much of the Prophets. At the critical moment when Paul might have been tempted to leap on the pedestal offered by the Lystrans he rejected their worship and attempted to steer them towards the God who is. For the moment at least, Paul and Barnabas had the crowd eating out of their hands. Ah, the stuff that clergy dreams are made of!

What do you do when the world falls at your feet? I had a professor in seminary who regularly warned his young colleagues not to pay too much attention to the compliments of church members

leaving worship. He warned that if you accept their pedestal, you may find yourself on their chopping block. That is the way it went with Paul and Barnabas, worshiped one day and stoned the next. No one is more at risk here than the ones who happen to end up on a pedestal of popularity. We no longer make our gods of stone or precious metals. Our pagan culture tends to worship the latest and best show in town.

James C. Howell of Myer's Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, NC, judged: "The Lystrans, like most people we know, were dizzy with the wondrous display, and didn't seem interested in what the miracle pointed to: good news! and Paul's insistence that they turn from false gods to the living God. Repent? We just want another miracle.

Maggie Ross once wrote that there are always those who want an experience of God more than they really want God! We want to feel good, to have things go smoothly, to enjoy a boatload of blessings—but miss out on a relationship with the living God, far more precious than any 'thing' or experience we might fantasize about."

I suspect that our world resembles that remark.