

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT FAITH Acts 14:8-18

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on July 14, 2019, the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series on the Acts of the Apostles, entitled “When...”

In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And the man sprang up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, “Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

Prayer: Follow, O Lord, the preaching of this word with your Spirit, that insofar as it is true, it will be written indelibly on our hearts; and insofar as it is false it will be quickly forgotten and do no harm. May all the words of my mouth and all the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight and give Thee glory. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I.

In the past several months, I have been party to the following conversations about Christian faith with either youth, young adults, or parents. Some of these conversations are with people from Westminster; some, with people from other churches; some, with the general public. Here is some of what people have said to me or in my presence:

- “What has held me back about believing in God in the past has been the question why bad things happen to good people. Lately, what I have most deeply felt is the question of why some people are born into such circumstances that they will *never* have a chance at life beyond pain and suffering and survival.”
- “All emotions are physiologically based. It’s brain activity, brain activity, brain activity. Even what you feel for your spouse and child. Brain activity, brain activity, brain activity. There is no such thing as a soul. It is all a matter of physiology.”
- “So my question is this: “What is the difference between pre-destination in Calvinism and Islamic fundamentalism? Aren’t they saying the same thing?”

- “When I am in a professional setting, I never feel I can talk about my faith. But I met someone the other day, someone I’ve known for years, and we found we are both elders in the Presbyterian Church. It led to a great conversation. I wish I could share my faith sooner and more often with people.”
- “Earlier this week, my daughter and I had a text exchange about the role of the Christianity in American politics today. It was something we *agreed* on. It was the first time we have had any discussion of religion in 40 years since she left the church in which we raised her. It is the beginning of an answer to forty years of prayer.”
- “I raised my son to be observant. After his *bar mitzvah*, he fell away. It has been this way for thirty years. It is the one major failure I feel as a parent, but it is in the most important aspect of parenting that I have failed.”

All of these are words I have heard spoken in recent weeks, months, years.

One of the best known short stories of Raymond Carver is entitled “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.”¹ What I propose is that “what we talk about when we talk about faith” sometimes needs to be “how can we talk about faith” at all because we so rarely do; and when we do, no matter how many sermons we have heard, no matter how many hymns we have sung, no matter how many classes in Old and New Testament we have taken, we don’t really know how to talk about our faith. We are not even sure that we should. “What we talk about when we talk about faith” is often how we feel unable or ill equipped.

II.

In the Book of Acts, there is a lot of talking about faith.

- At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes to three thousand people with tongues of fire, and Peter stands up to interpret what has happened with *words*.²
- A chapter later, when, after healing a lame man, Peter and John encounter tough questioning about their claim that Jesus is the Messiah long anticipated in Judaism, Peter seeks to show with words how Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises to the Jews throughout their history, and that his death and resurrection are essential to his Messiahship.³
- Eleven chapters later, in an entirely different setting, Paul and Barnabas also heal a man who has never been able to walk, and they are assumed by the hardscrabble working class people of Lystra to be gods come down to earth, a not uncommon belief in the religions of their day and time. Paul and Barnabas do all they can to convince the townspeople that they are not themselves gods. Instead, they encourage the Lystrans to believe in the *one* God through what they have seen of the beauty of nature.⁴

¹ Raymond Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” in *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*, edited by William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll (The Library of America, 2009), 310-323.

² Acts 2:1-47.

³ Acts 3:1-26.

⁴ Acts 14:4-18 (our passage).

There is a lot of talking about faith in Acts.

The challenges early Christian leaders faced as Christianity spread across the Greco-Roman world often involved the threat of persecution and death, and nearly always involved how to explain their new faith – with its peculiar beliefs of redemptive death and triumphant resurrection – to people whose language and culture were different from that of the initial leaders and from the Judaism in which their faith was hatched. The challenges they faced in talking about their faith are different than the challenges we face in talking about ours. But in some of what they faced, I find some wisdom we can receive as we seek to talk about our faith when the time and circumstances are right.

III.

The first thing we can glean from these early instances of talking on the part of Peter and Paul is that they *differ* in what they say.

Peter's speech, to Jews like himself steeped in the scriptures, is based in *what they have been taught* all their lives:

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus...

...God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer...

Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you..."

Peter's talk about faith is thus talk about Christ as Messiah. By contrast, Paul's speech, given to townspeople at Lystra – who are not Jewish but Greco-Roman – has little connection with Judaism, says nothing of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, and instead emphasizes nature.

'Friends...we bring you good news... [from] the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them....he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.'

Peter speaks about Christ; Paul, about nature. Peter speaks to educated, observant Jews in Jerusalem; Paul, to working class Romans in Lystra. Peter uses theological language; Paul, the language of nature.

What they have in common, however, is that both Peter and Paul meet the people with whom they are speaking *where they are*, have the conversation in terms which the people with whom they are speaking can understand and to which they can relate.

What this may say to us is that when we feel called upon to have a conversation about our faith with someone, especially someone with whom we are close, the most important aspect of the conversation is speaking in terms they can understand and addressing concerns they have. When we are talking with someone about faith, we need to start where they are, answer to the best of our ability the questions they have, and speak in a language and culture that fits them more than us. It is not always easy, but it is possible.

IV.

Second, *less important* than the *doctrinal points* we might make is the *common human bond* we establish with whomever it is we are talking.

The man and his daughter who had not been able to talk about faith for years found a common bond in a half sentence text message in which they found agreement concerning the role Christianity should play in the politics of our nation today. A half sentence. On a text message. But it represented the beginning of a thaw in a relationship in which matters of faith and religion had been off limits for decades.

When Paul begins his speech to the townspeople at Lystra, he says: “We are mortals just like you.” He then goes on to point to nature –something to which all human beings have access – as bearing witness to the existence and presence of God. What we talk about when we talk about faith is something human we share.

V.

Finally, when we talk about faith, we need to remind ourselves that what we say and how we say it only matters so much. It is neither our effort nor eloquence that moves another person toward faith; it is rather the way God uses what we say – through the Holy Spirit – that determines whether the person with whom we are talking takes what we say and moves closer to faith.

At the end of our story today, Luke writes:

Even with these words, [Paul and Barnabas] scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

As hard as they tried, Paul and Barnabas were not able to dispel the Lystrans from the false notion that they (Paul and Barnabas) were gods.

Conversely, when we venture to speak with someone about faith, need to give ourselves the measure of grace God gives us in recognizing that our words may not accomplish what we would like. We need to remember that it is ultimately what the Spirit does with our words as they are received by the person who hears them that moves that person to belief.

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This past winter, in a discussion at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, someone shared the prayer with which I began today’s sermon. The prayer was new to me, but I wrote down every word. It most directly applies to preachers; but it can truly be said *by* any of us who ventures to speak of our faith with someone else, including a child or grandchild we are tucking into bed.

Follow, O Lord, the speaking of this word I am about to say with your Spirit, that insofar as it is true, it will be written indelibly on the heart of the person with whom I am speaking; and insofar as it is false it will be quickly forgotten and do no harm.

What we talk about when we talk about our faith is more than anything else what God does with our words.

Amen.

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