



Comedy, Tragedy, and Bravery in Evangelism

Acts 14

August 27, 2006

COMEDY Acts 14:8-13

This summer the movie “Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest” hit the movie screens. Once again, Johnny Depp plays the pirate captain Jack Sparrow. He is shipwrecked on a desert island, and held captive by the natives. It is a kind of royal captivity, because the natives think he is a god. They paint on him divine symbols and all-seeing eyes. And they place him on a throne and worship him. And so the comedy begins.

Something like that happened to Paul and Barnabas when they walked into the remote village called Lystra during that first missionary journey. Lystra was not a desert island; it was more of a retirement village in central Turkey for old Roman soldiers. But it was remote, and its citizens, while experienced in warfare, were naïve in religion.

So this was the kind of place that Paul and Barnabas were walking into. Paul was growing into greatness. The kinds of mighty signs that Jesus had done, and later Peter had done, such as healing the blind and the lame, Paul was beginning to do himself. The power of God that once barely trickled through Paul was becoming a mighty stream of grace. So Paul and Barnabas walked into Lystra and announced the good news about Jesus.

As they spoke, Paul noticed that one man, a lame man, was listening very intensely. Paul could almost see the faith lighting up in the man’s eyes. So Paul looked straight into the man’s face and ordered him, “Get up on your feet.” And the man stood up.

And that’s when the comedy began. The crowd that saw this miracle began to declare, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” They must have remembered an old story by the great writer Ovid, who told of a pious old couple near this very town that had been visited by none other than the gods Zeus and Hermes in human form. Now the crowds pointed to Paul and Barnabas and cried, “Here they are again!” They pointed at Barnabas and said, “That dignified-looking one there must be Zeus!” They pointed at Paul and said, “That one that talks so much must be Hermes, the messenger of Zeus!” And then it got even better. None other than the priest of the local temple of Zeus showed up with ceremonial garlands and oxen to be sacrificed to Zeus and Hermes!

TRAGEDY

Back to Jack Sparrow, who was worshipped by natives as a god. If you saw the movie, you'll remember that somehow Jack's fortunes turned suddenly, and Jack went from being their god to being tied up on a spit to be barbecued over an open fire. Something like that happened to Paul and Barnabas. One minute they were being worshipped as gods by the natives. The next minute Paul was being stoned to death:

But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium; and having persuaded the people, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. (Acts 14:19)

It seems that Paul and Barnabas had made some enemies back in the last two towns they had been. In those towns they had visited local synagogues where they told their fellow Jews about the gospel of Jesus. Some Jews were curious, but others were threatened and even jealous of all the attention Paul and Barnabas were getting. So Paul and Barnabas were chased out of the last two towns they had visited. In fact, a group kept on chasing the two with the same hatred that Paul once had when he was hunting Christians himself.

So their enemies chased them down to Lystra, and poisoned the minds of the locals there, until a crowd surrounded Paul and began to stone him to death. What had been a comedy was now a tragedy. They stoned him until he didn't move anymore. Then they dragged his still body out of town. You and I know he was still alive, barely, but pause for a minute and ponder how different the story would be if they had killed Paul. Think of all that would not have been: no journey to Corinth, nor to Ephesus, nor to Rome. No great letters from Paul to those churches or in our Bibles. The shape of Christianity could have been very, very different. A lot could have died along with Paul. No more comedy; only tragedy.

COMEDY AND TRAGEDY IN EVANGELISM TODAY

When you and I seek to tell the good news about Jesus Christ, there can be moments of comedy and there can be moments of tragedy.

Do you remember the story I tell about my friends Jeff and Jana when they received a visit from a church? Jeff and Jana had come to Winston-Salem from Alabama. Jeff was one of the new chaplain trainees at Baptist Hospital. So when they came to town, they began visiting churches. It was, shall we say, a very interesting experience to compare how churches responded to them.

One evening they were relaxing in their apartment when there was a knock at the door. It was a couple from the church they had visited last Sunday. The couple came in and, after some small talk, launched into a presentation of the plan of salvation to Jana and Jeff, the chaplain-trainee at Baptist Hospital. Jeff and Jana immediately told them that they were Christians too, but the couple just kept on with their presentation. Jeff and

Jana told them again, but it was too late. This couple was on plan-of-salvation-autopilot, and nothing would stop them until they had come to the end of their flight plan.

That visit qualifies as both comedy and tragedy in evangelism. It is sort of funny, but also sort of sad that this couple didn't listen to Jeff and Jana. If they had, they would have heard what Jeff and Jana desperately wanted to say, which was they were very lonely in this new city, and would very much like to make new friends.

On the other hand, it would also be a tragedy for you or me to go visit a person who is not a believer but curious about Jesus, and fail to hear that person's curiosity, and fail to tell a bit of our story of our own experience with the Savior.

Tragedy in evangelism comes when we fail to really listen to the other person. We may miss their own excitement of their own experience with Christ. We may miss their immediate need, such as being hungry for friendship. Or we may miss their curiosity about Jesus and thus fail to minister to their hunger for knowledge and relationship with a Savior and Lord.

And tragedy in evangelism comes when others fail to really listen to us. One risk of doing the work of an evangelist is the risk of being misunderstood. It happens. The gospel of Jesus is a message that threatens vested interests. Jesus didn't get killed because he was a nice little man who went around telling nice little stories. His message of the coming rule of God threatened and offended some people. They didn't like the people he ministered to. They didn't like losing religious control over people. That is the risk we take in evangelism, to be misunderstood. (Or maybe, to be understood all too well.)

Some of you remember when Jimmy Carter was campaigning for the White House. He spoke freely and openly of his experience of being a born-again Christian. The press and much of the public didn't know what to make of that. It has taken about thirty years for the public and the press to move from ridicule of his faith back then to respect for his faith-inspired peacemaking and homebuilding now.

Sometimes evangelism has moments of comedy, sometimes moments of tragedy. And many times evangelism has moments of bravery, like the bravery of Paul.

THE BRAVERY OF PAUL

Acts 14:20-27

It is astonishing that Paul got up alive. But it is even more astounding that he walked right back into the town where his enemies had just tried to kill him. Now that is bravery! Not only did Paul go back into Lystra, he and Barnabas also went back to the other cities where their enemies had run them out of town. Brave Paul and Barnabas were intent on making sure that every church they had started would have a core of committed leadership to lead every church into God's future. They helped each church select their leaders, pray over them, and commit them to the Lord Jesus. And through their bravery, God opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Where did that bravery come from? It came from their memories of the Christ who had gone before them. William Barclay once penned a prayer that goes:

We thank you that he too had to bear unfair criticism, prejudiced opposition, malicious and deliberate misunderstanding.

We thank you that whatever happens to us, he has been there before, and that, because he himself has gone through things, he is able to help those who are going through them.

That's where Paul got his bravery: he knew that whatever happened to him, that Jesus had been there before. He knew Jesus is able to help those who are going through them now. Sometimes there is comedy in evangelism, and sometimes tragedy, but always there is bravery.

THE BRAVERY OF US

When is bravery called for from us, we who are evangelists in our community? In 21st century America we have freedoms that Paul and past generations of believers could only dream of. Nobody is going to stone us here. In fact, the only legal restriction on our evangelism in America is that we cannot use the power of the state to spread our message. Actually, that restriction has *helped* faith to flourish in our land. Whenever Christians have tried to use the power of the state to spread the Word, the result has been weak evangelism and weaker churches!

But even in this land of the free, bravery is still vital in evangelism. We must be brave enough to take our message into the marketplace without any help from government. We must be brave enough to take our message into the community now without any help from the culture like we used to have. In fact, we have to have the courage to go into our community as if it were A.D. 30 all over again. Back then, belief in Jesus Christ was an unfamiliar concept in a world that was full of many mysterious and exotic religions. Here and now, people live in a confused jumble of many mysterious and exotic religious options, which they pick through as if they were going through a cafeteria line.

Here and now, it is up to us to go into our communities with the message of Jesus' vision of the rule of God and with the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. That message is as strange to modern ears now as it was in A.D. 30. We who bear that message will be misunderstood and even maligned in public opinion. But just remember the same thing that kept Paul going: whatever happened to him, Jesus had been there before, and Jesus stands with us now to us who are going through the same hardships.

We won't be stoned or crucified. But we will be misunderstood. We may even be laughed at. But if we are brave, at least we won't be ignored.

-- Doug Murray