

“Keeping God God!”

My sermon title today is: “Keeping God God”. No, that’s not a misprint! It’s not a case of “writer’s stuttering”! I didn’t hiccup when I was typing “God” on the computer, and wind up typing it twice! I thought this was an appropriate title for the story found in Acts, chapter 14.

Paul and Silas are on their first missionary journey. They go to the town of Lystra, a town in modern day Turkey, and proclaim the gospel of Christ. There’s a man sitting there who’s been lame from birth – never walked. He listens intently to what Paul’s preaching. At some point Paul turns and looks at this man intently, sensing that he has faith to be healed, and in a loud voice Paul says, “Stand upright on your feet!” (Acts 14:10). And with that, the man *springs up* on his feet, and starts to walk!

Boy, does that get the attention of the crowd there! “When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’” (Acts 14:11). They start to call Barnabas “Zeus” – the king of the gods! They call Paul “Hermes”, since Paul was the main speaker! Hermes was the patron god of speech! Somehow in all of the noise and hullabaloo the priest of Zeus gets word of what’s going on, and he brings garlands to decorate, and an oxen – and is about ready to sacrifice the oxen – at the urging of the crowd. (*Try to picture the scene – it’s almost comical*).

I doubt that this had ever happened before to Paul and Silas – I mean, here they are, being worshiped as gods! *So how did they respond?* They rip their clothes – a sign of penitence, humanness - and answer: “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you” (Acts 14:15). They urge them to turn from their vain worship and superstition, and turn to the living God! But even then they have trouble refraining the people: “Even with these words, they scarcely refrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them” (Acts 14:18).

So, what’s the message in this strange story? Well, I think the message is: Keeping God *God*! God is God. And we not! God is God. Humans are humans.

Let’s not make a god out of any person. We can make a god out of a pop singer, a movie star, a sports superstar. I went to a lot of Hershey Bears hockey games when I was younger. One year my dad, my sister, and I really got into Bears hockey. It was toward the end of the season. That year the Bears had won the Calder Cup in the playoffs. And we were able to join the Booster Club in time to go to their end of season banquet. I was young, impressionable. These were players I idolized. I couldn’t wait till the banquet. Well, at the banquet, the liquor flowed, and some of the players were drunk. My dad tried to soften it: “They were under a lot of pressure during the playoffs...”. I’m sure they were. But many of them were drunk that night. They made donkeys out of themselves. I was disappointed. And sad.

Couples, when they first fall in love, can almost make a god out of their partner. There have been times I’ve given a little talk at a wedding ceremony, and gently reminded the couple that each of them is a sinner. That can get kind of tacky, even though it’s the truth. I figure they’ll find that out pretty quickly after they’re married. If they’ve been living together, they probably already know! Their partner doesn’t quite come up to the level of being a god!

Don't make a god out of any other person.

I could say that I've been in that same situation as Paul and Silas! Because I'm a preacher like Paul and Silas, I've had people think I'm some kind of god come down to earth! I *could* say that. (Actually, I *could* say anything! But it may not be true!). I confess, nobody's ever thought I was Zeus (king of the gods). Nobody's ever called me Hermes (patron god of speech)! I've been called a lot of other names!

But sometimes people can almost make a god out of pastor or TV evangelist. (Not as much of it today, since some prominent pastors and TV preachers have fallen prey to sex scandals or love of money and wealth – but there's still some of that). Some people tend to think their pastor operates on a different plane – somehow a cut higher than normal human beings. I can tell you, without hesitation, that is not true! Clergy are very human!

The crowd in Lystra thought that Barnabas and Paul were gods who came to visit them. Um... no! Making a god out of someone can only lead to bitter disappointment.

Jesus viewed people realistically. Look at what is said of Him in the gospel of John: "When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone (John 2:23-25). He knew what was in everyone!

By the way, just a little side note here: One of the reasons this whole event happened was because of the miracle that took place. A man lame from birth was healed, and sprang up and started to walk! The people figured only gods could do that!

That was normal stuff in the early church! Healings, miracles. Not so much in the church today – though there's no reason why this shouldn't be the case. Thank God *there are* places where we see evidence of the power of God doing extraordinary things in and through the Church today! (Kind of a follow up from last week's message on the power of the Holy Spirit). God give us more miracles in the church today!

The other thing I believe God is saying through this story in Acts 14 is this: *God will not share His glory with any other.* Isaiah 42:8 says, "I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other." And Isaiah 48:11: "My glory I will not give to another." Let God *alone* be God!

There is a dramatic story in the Bible of someone who claimed the glory for himself that is due only for God. It's found in Acts 12:20-23. "Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they came to him in a body; and after winning over Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for a reconciliation, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Hero put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them. The people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god, and not a mortal!' And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down,

and he was eaten by worms and died.”

The Adam and Eve story in Genesis teach us that man’s basic sin is *pride*. Wanting to play God. God told them what to do and what not to do, and Adam and Eve basically said, “We’ll do what we want. We can run our own lives, call the shots, set the rules. We don’t need God to tell us what to do and how to live.” But when that happened....ouch! Sin infected the world, life began to go downhill, and the rest is history!

God will not share His glory with anyone! Remember that, you TV preachers, who love to strut around in front of the camera and the crowd acting like you know it all. Remember that, you secularists, who think you can set the rules for living and leave your Maker out of the equation. The historic catechism of the church said it all: “The chief end of man is to *glorify* God, and enjoy Him forever.”

Paul and Barnabas resisted the urge to eat up the praises and worship of the crowd. Instead, they insisted: “Stop this foolishness; we are mere human beings!” God will share His glory with no other!

And yet, you know what? *God does want to ultimately share His glory with us!* He wants us to be able to participate in the glorious evidences of His kingdom breaking into the world. We see this in the mighty works that took place in the early church, and ever since! God used Paul to bring a miraculous healing to a man crippled from birth! That’s what moved the crowd to think they were gods. The Book of Acts is filled with instances of extraordinary healing, and miracles, and several other instances when the onlookers began to think those involved in the miracle were gods!

Thank God there are places in the church today where the glory and presence of God is felt and witnessed. Our adult Sunday School class is doing a video series led by Jim Cymbala, who has been pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle for over 50 years. Jim shares just one of the amazing things that have been happening in that church over the years. One Easter Sunday, after 4 services, preaching, praying with people at the altar, he said he was just dead tired. He sat on the edge of the stage, with his legs hanging over – totally drained. After most of the congregation had filed out, a man still in the seats asked if he could speak with Jim. Jim knew he was a homeless man. Filthy clothes. He said the man was the worst smelling human being he had ever encountered – he smelled of urine and feces and alcohol -the smell made him feel physically ill.

He didn’t want to deal with him. So he reached in his pocket and took out some money to give him – breaking all the rules – since they never gave out money, which would most likely be spent on drugs or alcohol. But the man batted it down. He said he didn’t want money. He wanted this Jesus Jim had preached about. At that, Jim said, I felt so guilty and ashamed. He began to pray to God for forgiveness, and Jim began to cry. The man saw what was happening, and also started to weep. Jim led this man to Christ. They embraced one another. The next day they saw that he got to a hospital for detox. He began to heal. He was given a position on the church staff as a custodian. Cleaned up, he looked handsome. He found a young lady in the

congregation. They fell in love, and got married. Eventually this one-time homeless drunk moved to New Jersey, and became the pastor of a church!

God wants us to share in His glory and to be part of the movement of the kingdom of God, which is bringing pockets of healing and reconciliation and peace to this sinful world. I treasure those times in my ministry when God has broken through the predictability of a worship service or church-related event and done something that thrills the soul, and made His presence and glory known!

But God also wants us to share in His glory forever – in His eternal kingdom! Jesus once prayed, “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

Colossians 3:4 says, “When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Romans 8:18: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”

2 Timothy 2:10: “Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.”

Jesus ended one of his parables with these words: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matthew 13:43).

Imagine that! This God, whose glory is beyond our comprehension, wants to share this glory with His people – the humble, believing, obedient. Forever!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
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