Acts: “Be Courageous”
Acts 14: 1-7

This morning we return to our journey through Acts. Our text will be Acts 14:1-7, please stand and let us read the Word of the Lord together.

Paul and Barnabas have recently been in the city of Pisidian-Antioch. While they were ministering there, God moved powerfully, first among many Jews, and then even among the Gentiles, or those who were “non-Jews.” Nevertheless, those who opposed the gospel ended up running the apostles out of town, and so this morning we find Paul and Barnabas in the city of Iconium.

Just a few notes about Iconium before we move on. First, the 80 mile route between Pisidian-Antioch and Iconium was on the famous Roman trade route known as the “Via Sebaste” or the “Royal Road,” which would have been the most logical and safest route for Paul and Barnabas to travel. Iconium, or what is today the Turkish city of “Konya,” sits on a high plateau with an altitude of 3,370 feet above sea level.

So as we look to our text, Luke reports in vs. 1: “Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.”

Paul and Barnabas always begin their work proclaiming the gospel to the Jews in a local synagogue if there is one available. On this occasion in Iconium, there are both Jews and God-fearing Greeks present, and for whatever reason, many of those present in the synagogue BELIEVE the message of Paul and Barnabas. Luke observes that the apostles “spoke in such a way” that many people believed. I find that bit of description to be frustratingly vague! As a pastor, I’m eager to know the way that they spoke which led many people of various cultures to believe the gospel! At the minimum, we must assume that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and that the apostles spoke to both the heart and the mind of the listeners. They spoke with a conviction and an anointing that convinced many regarding the truth of the gospel. That is always the goal whenever the gospel is publicly proclaimed…to see many come to believe and follow Jesus Christ.

Now, watch what happens when the Gospel of Jesus Christ is publicly proclaimed and believed by many. Look at vs. 2, “But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.”

Not unlike what happened in Pisidian-Antioch, the Jews who were offended by the Gospel…those who interpreted the Gospel of Jesus Christ as heresy, form rank and resist the
message of the apostles. However, the situation in Iconium is quite unusual because the angry Jews appeal to the Gentiles to garner support for their cause. Now that’s a bit ironic, because most Gentiles in the ancient world considered the Jews to be an insufferable group of people due to their monotheistic worldview and their ascetic practices. To put it another way, the Gentiles in Iconium would have been completely unsympathetic to the theological complaints of the Jews towards the message of the gospel. So what does that mean?

It means that the Jews who opposed Paul and Silas in Iconium had to come up with a good story…something that would ignite the anger of both Jews and Gentiles within their community. I think it’s likely that they built their case around a social issue…one that served as a perceived threat to both Jewish and Gentile citizens in Iconium.

There is another ancient source that speaks to Paul’s time in Iconium. This text is NOT scripture, nor do we consider it to be 100% historically reliable like the book of Acts. However, I think it’s worth mentioning because it gives us an idea of what the social issue might have been.

In the Apocryphal writings surrounding the New Testament, there is a document dated to the second century AD called *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The document is basically a story that unpacks Paul’s visit to Iconium in greater detail. According to that account, the Jews in Iconium twist the teachings of Paul and claim that he is causing the whole town to forsake marriage and embrace celibacy. Now, to be clear, we don’t know if that is true, and historians do not hold this document in high regard because it does not pass the stink test in terms of its authorship and historicity. Nevertheless, it provides a good example of a social issue that may have well been used by the opponents of Christianity to stir up strife and division. It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to picture the scene if the message of Christianity was equated with the end of sex and marriage, right? That would certainly divide a town in a hurry. My point is simply this: the division that comes about in Iconium is not directly attributable to the claims of the Gospel, rather the division results from the “corrupted interpretation” of the message by those who are trying to oppose the Gospel. Such is often the case throughout church history, and even in our culture today. I would hazard to guess that more people reject Christianity because of what they have heard about it, or what they have observed in the behavior of those who call themselves Christians, as opposed to actually considering and then rejecting Christianity on the merits of the biblical message itself.

Be that as it may, we’ll see the proclamation of the gospel lead to division in one town after another as we work our way through the book of Acts, so I want to speak to that for just a moment.

First of all, we should not be the least bit surprised that the Gospel gives birth to division. Why?
Do you remember what Jesus predicted in Luke 12:51-53? Here’s what He said, “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” Jesus was clear that He would cause division.

Now I know some of you are feeling upset about this inevitable conflict brought about by the gospel. In fact, for some of you, the perceived division that comes about due to the claims of the gospel is exactly why you feel suspect and even repulsed by Christianity. I understand your concern.

Many of us, me included, have been brought up to believe that the greatest good in society is peace at all costs. In fact, the prevailing philosophy of our current age can be summed up in one word that captures the conviction of peace at any cost, and that word is TOLERANCE. In our culture, tolerance is the highest of all virtues. The dream of tolerance is that we will all coexist and get along if we can only come to a point of tolerating those who think, believe, look and behave differently than we do. So…the Gospel creates division in a world that celebrates tolerance. It’s no wonder, then, that most Millenials have come to believe that Christianity is the enemy of tolerance. Is that true?

Tolerance is defined by Webster as a fair and permissive attitude toward those whose race, religion, and nationality, etc. differ from one’s own; freedom from bigotry. And just so we’re clear, bigotry is defined as “extreme intolerance of any creed, belief, or opinion that differs from one’s own.” So…the goal of our culture, then, is to be fair and permissive to those who are different from us, and to avoid extreme intolerance against those we disagree with.

Now let’s return to the story and examine the situation in Iconium a bit closer with the value of tolerance in mind. Might we assume there was a higher level of religious tolerance in Iconium prior to the arrival of Christianity? Yes…that is likely true. The Roman rule for religion was largely “live and let live” as long as the religion of choice did not in any way challenge Roman authorities. Roman law generally protected the “freedom of religious” expression; so, if you think about it, the ancient context in Iconium was not dissimilar to the context of our modern American culture in that regard. Keep in mind, however, that many of the religious/cultic practices in antiquity led to brutality and what we might call “universal immorality,” such as sacrificing your children, pedophilia, prostitution, and slavery. Tolerance in the ancient world meant those practices went unchecked.

So what happens when Paul and Barnabas introduce the gospel of Jesus Christ? First of all, many people from various cultures believe the gospel is TRUTH. That’s quite significant. In a pluralistic culture of tolerance, all religions are assumed to be NOT TRUTH, though the practice
of those religions might be deemed helpful to those who ascribe to them. However, when Paul and Barnabas proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, many believe the Gospel to be TRUE, and of course, Paul and Barnabas are convinced that the gospel is TRUTH.

Truth is a deal-breaker in a culture of tolerance because it renders competing claims to be “untrue.” Such is why Christianity will always lead to some degree of division. The claim that Jesus Christ is Lord is exclusive to the claim that Zeus is lord, or that the Messiah has not yet come, or that Jesus was a notable prophet second only to Mohammed. If Jesus Christ is Lord, those other statements must be false, and so now we have division.

Division, however, does not necessarily lead to violence. Some conflict and division is inevitable, and sometimes it’s healthy.

Many of you might remember Malcolm Gladwell’s 2008 bestselling book entitled, *Outliers*. In that book Gladwell discusses how the fear of conflict and division among flight crews would often lead to crashes among certain cultural airlines where the commitment to “peace at all costs” was so culturally engrained that the flight crew would simply not confront the captain. In one particular case, when the flight engineer should have demanded that the pilot divert his plane from the terrible storm that caused them to crash, he instead said, “Captain, the weather radar has helped us a lot.” Gladwell calls that kind of conflict avoidance the practice of mitigation. So instead of stating what was clearly true, the engineer tried to hint to what was true so as to not offend the captain, but he did so at the expense of all the lives on that plane.

The proclamation of the gospel is not unlike that situation that Gladwell described. A pluralistic culture based on tolerance is accustomed to polite suggestions regarding “what works for me” as culturally acceptable expressions of religion. Christianity, however, states bluntly, “This plane is going down if we do not turn. Turn now. Turn or we all die!” The gospel is, therefore, confrontational by nature, and confrontational messaging will always cause division in a tolerance-based society.

But listen, here’s what we know is true: you don’t want your cardiologist to “tolerate” plaque in your arteries and mitigate his words to you out of fear of offense. It’s not helpful for him to say, “The EKG has been very helpful to us.” We need the Doctor to say, “You need surgery now...right now...or you are going to have a massive heart-attack and die.” The loving doctor is intolerant of our smoking and our obsession with cheese if he knows such life-style decisions are contributing to our heart failure.

You see, tolerance at first looks like a beautiful virtue, particularly when held up against the violence that often accompanies intolerance. But in the end, tolerance is not actually loving...it’s actually quite selfish and unloving. Think about it: the paid child-care providers tolerate rude and
disruptive behavior from children, but loving parents do not. LOVE requires conflict and confrontation if it means the difference between life and death; strong character or a life of crime; a healthy marriage or a crushing divorce; keeping one’s integrity or compromising one’s core beliefs. In light of what the Bible tells us to be true, we must risk confrontation and the real possibility of division because it’s a matter of heaven or hell; it’s a matter of people being set free or living in slavery; it’s a matter of justice or injustice; it’s a matter of finding hope or remaining crushed by the wounds of this life. I’m not promoting intolerance; I am promoting telling the truth in love at the risk of creating conflict or even division. Tolerance says there will be no peace if people claim that something is exclusively true; the Gospel says there will be no peace in the absence of truth.

The urgency of the soul-saving mission of the Gospel is worth the conflict and the division that the gospel inevitably creates. We see this truth lived out by Paul and Barnabas in our story this morning. The storm of conflict is brewing, and the dissenting Jews have poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas, but look what comes next in vs. 3, “So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.” Paul and Barnabas can see the storm coming, but they stay. They continue to proclaim the good news of forgiveness in Christ because they know that souls are at stake. And God meets them in the midst of that coming storm and empowers their testimony with great signs and wonders. You want to see God move powerfully? Stay when every part of you wants to run away. Demonstrate the Holy Spirit virtue of courage…place your faith in the power of Christ, and in that context, God will do incredible things in you and through you. As C. S. Lewis writes, “Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.” In the end, what we believe will be tested in conflict and revealed in our actions. True faith requires courage; and as such I believe faith provides courage…God gives us what we need at that moment when we trust Him in the midst of our fears.

Dr. Kent Hughes writes, “Such pluck and spunk has always been true of God’s warriors. John Wesley once encountered a village bully when their carriages met upon a narrow road. The bully knew Wesley and disliked him and would not give him any leeway, staying in the middle of the road. John Wesley cheerfully gave the man the entire road, even though he had to turn into the ditch. As they passed, the bully said, “I never turn out for fools.” And Wesley—all five foot two of him replied, “I always do.”

Christians are called to be courageous, to endure suffering and scorn. We endure intolerance, but we do not engage or participate in acts of intolerance. We hold to and bear witness to the truth of the gospel, but we never do so in a way that belittles, insults, or injures those who disagree with us.
I suspect many of you have observed the irony of a pluralistic, tolerance-oriented society. The irony is that all forms of religions and lifestyles are allowed and even celebrated as the “joy of diversity” until a Christian stands up and says, “This is true, and it is therefore exclusive of all competing claims of truth.” Such is always the claim of Christianity as we have seen, and so it is and has always been that Christianity suffers greater persecution and intolerance worldwide than any other religion. Ironically, those most committed to tolerance and pluralism are often those most violent in their intolerance towards Christianity. But note, though our gospel message is an exclusive, unapologetic claim of truth, our proclamation can never be accompanied with acts of violence or forced subjugation. Wherever such violence has been employed in the name of Christianity, there the seeds of the anti-Christ have been sown. The church must regularly repent and make restitution for any time and place when Christianity attempted to advance at the tip of a sword. Those occasions are few in history, but they are there, and we must never repeat those mistakes or participate in any form of bigotry.

Our text concludes with vss. 4-7, “But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, and there they continued to preach the gospel.”

We are called to be brave, but not foolish. As Kent Hughes writes “Paul and Barnabas were born again, not born yesterday!” There comes a time when we must wipe the dust off our feet and move on. That is often how the gospel spreads from village to village throughout the world as we have seen now on several occasions in the book of Acts. Sometimes courage means staying; sometimes it means being willing to move on to uncharted territories in obedience to God’s leading. In either case, we are called to be courageous.

We’ll pick up here next Sunday, but I want to close by reminding you of what is at stake. The salvation of souls is at stake. The plight of the orphan is at stake. Justice and reconciliation are at stake. Marriages are at stake. The character formation of our children is at stake.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ brings truth and light to all of these areas of our existence, so we must…we must be courageous. We must risk conflict and division to speak the Gospel, to live the Gospel, and to serve others with the hope of the Gospel. Be courageous. Let’s pray.