

## **Acts 13:1-3, 14:8-18**

I really ricocheted between the sublime and the ridiculous as I thought about today's story. It got some synapses firing that I couldn't quite connect for the longest time. But I think I have a hold of it now. I think we can best understand this story by referring to Gerald Durrell's memoirs of his childhood, the book of Jonah, and a new book by the journalist Jon Ward, *Testimony: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Failed a Generation*. So buckle up.

First, indulge me, because I have to re-tell the Acts story with the footnotes that Luke somehow left out.

First of all, Paul had never known Jesus during his life, so there was a real question among Jesus' first disciples about how valid his apostleship was. Luke is showing us, it was super-valid. Paul's mandate from the risen Christ was to take the good news out into the world, beyond the Jewish community, into gentile communities. Today Paul and Barnabas are doing just that, but with cross-cultural pratfalls.

Paul is said to have been not classically handsome. Well, actually, homely. Short and bow-legged, with a unibrow and male pattern balding, nevertheless he had tremendous facility as a speaker as well as, apparently, supreme self-assurance. They get to Lystra and he starts preaching, catching the attention of a man who can't walk. They lock eyes and Paul perceives that this man hopes he can heal him, so he does, boom, and the man is not just walking but leaping and dancing. The crowd goes wild. But they don't quite get what had happened.

We fit new learnings into the categories we have, and that is exactly what this crowd in Lystra does. "Whoopee, it's Zeus and Hermes, come down for a visit," they say to each other in the Lycaonian language. Why Zeus and Hermes? Well, these two visitors--one talks a lot but is

ugly, so he'd be the messenger of the gods, and the other is handsome and doesn't say much so he'd be Zeus. Luke doesn't spell it out, but it's there.

ALSO there is a popular legend at the time, which Ovid had included in his *Metamorphoses*, about a time when Zeus and Hermes had decided to disguise themselves as human beings and travel on the earth. When they got tired, they knocked on a thousand doors, but no one in the village would offer them hospitality. Finally, they knocked on the dilapidated door of the humble cottage of an elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, and were welcomed in. As their guests ate, Philemon and Baucus noticed that each dish and each goblet of wine refilled by itself, as if by magic. Distraught, they prayed to the gods to make amends for whatever awful thing they'd done. Zeus and Hermes revealed themselves and assured the elderly couple that no harm would come to them. They took Philemon and Baucis to a nearby mountainside. When the couple looked back, they saw that their entire village had been consumed by a swamp, but their home had been turned into a temple. To reward them for their hospitality and piety, Zeus offered to grant the couple anything they wished. What they wished was to die at the same time so neither would have to mourn the other, and so when they died, they became two trees entwined together.

If that's the story in the back of your head, and a couple of strangers show up and start talking about God acting among us and then dramatically heal someone you personally know has never been able to walk--well, you are not going to make the same mistake that other village made! You are going to roll out the red carpet. But while the people of Lystra are processing these events in their own language, affirming to each other that definitely the ugly one who talks a lot is Hermes, and speculating about what kind of blessings they could reap for

offering hospitality, Paul and Barnabas are blissfully unaware of the alternative story they have just re-enacted. It is not until the actual priest of Zeus shows up with garlands and some oxen to sacrifice that they realize with horror that their mission has gone terribly wrong. Then they tear their garments in great distress and try to persuade the Lystrans to take a breath.

It is at this point that I would question my entire strategy and sense of call. Clearly these two apostles are in over their heads. When the priest of Zeus himself is pushing his way forward to crown you with floral tributes, you know your project has gone off the rails somehow. And this is where I found myself remembering Gerald Durrell's memoirs, because in between truly gorgeous descriptions of the Greek countryside, he offers us human interactions characterized by tunnel vision and a benevolent willingness to fold other people into one's own personal drama. Here, for instance, is his description of his own boyhood birthday party:

Gradually the guests arrived, and the front of the villa was a surging mass of carriages and taxis. The great drawing-room and dining room were full of people, talking and arguing and laughing, and the butler, who to Mother's dismay had donned a tail-coat, moved swiftly through the throng like an elderly penguin, serving drinks and food with such a regal air that a lot of the guests were not at all sure if he was a real butler, or merely some eccentric relative we had staying with us. (p. 169)

More guests arrive, including a peasant family who give Gerry two puppies who came to be called Widdle and Puke.

Still the guests came, overflowing the drawing-room into the dining-room, and out of the French windows onto the veranda. Some of them had come thinking that they would be bored, and after an hour or so they enjoyed themselves so much that they called their carriages, went home, and reappeared with the rest of their families. The wine flowed, the air was blue with cigarette smoke, and the geckos were too frightened to come out of the cracks in the ceiling because of the noise and laughter. In one corner of the room Theodore, having daringly removed his coat, was dancing the *Kalamatiano* with Leslie and several other of the more exhilarated guests, their feet crashing and shuddering on the floor as they leaped and stamped. The butler, having perhaps taken a

little more wine than was good for him, was so carried away by the sight of the national dance that he put his tray down and joined in, leaping and stamping as vigorously as anyone, in spite of his age, his coat-tails flapping behind him. Mother, smiling in a rather forced and distraught manner, was wedged between the English padre, who was looking with increasing disapproval at the revelry, and the Belgian consul, [under the false impression that she was fluent in French] who was chattering away in her ear and twirling his moustache. Spiro appeared from the kitchen to find out where the butler had got to, and promptly joined in the *Kalamatiano*. Balloons drifted across the room, bouncing against the dancers' legs, exploding suddenly with loud bangs; Larry, out on the veranda, was endeavoring to teach a group of Greeks some of the finer English limericks. Puke and Widdle had gone to sleep in someone's hat. (pp. 170-171)

Chaos, you say? But everyone feels that they know what is going on, and is fully comfortable.

Paul and Barnabas' misfortune was that they really wanted people to understand their message accurately. So they appealed to the Lystrans' prior experience, pointing out that the God they were talking about had already been feeding and caring for the Lystrans before they knew God's name, and was now inviting them into a closer relationship, heretofore available only to the Jews. The assigned reading cuts off at this point, so that we might all nod approvingly at the apostles' ingenuity and perseverance in squashing the Zeus-Hermes connection. But it's not the end of the story. What happens next is that some Jewish Lystrans show up and try to stone Paul to death for the very same reason that Saul used to try to cut down Jesus-followers: it's blasphemy to say God's messiah would be crucified. So they leave Paul for dead, the other apostles pick him up, and they retreat to the next town over.

At the end of the book of Jonah, the prophet is so angry at God for accepting the Ninevehns' repentance and failing to destroy the city, that he goes and pouts on a hillside. God questions him gently, "Do you do well to be angry?" Yes, Jonah says, "angry enough to die!" Well, God says, "should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are

more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

That's the last word. The story ends there. But it's not a rhetorical question, and clearly the answer is Yes, the God of Israel is also tenderly protective of the people of Nineveh, who do not even know their right hand from their left. It is in that spirit, I believe, that Paul and Barnabas, having succeeded wildly in the next city, return straightaway to Lystra and start all over again. The people of Lystra also do not know their right hand from their left, and far from being afraid of them or angry at them, the apostles are eager to get good news across to them. It's very brave and very tender, and their attitude really reinforces what they'd said about God's love being evident in nature.

That's all we hear. The apostles returned to the place where they'd been misunderstood and attacked, and they are full of grace and hope. This is where Jon Ward's book comes in. Jon Ward's parents were Jesus People in the 1970s, and raised a family of charismatic, politically conservative children. The book details his own love-hate relationship with conservative Christianity, and his development as a journalist, which teaches him to listen to people to try to understand them rather than to influence them. A lot of the men who were important in his church community growing up are now important in the Trump movement, and his own parents and siblings are active Trump supporters. Ward details his distress and despair as Trump consolidated authoritarianism and encouraged white supremacists and Christian nationalists to go public. As someone who covers the news, he knew better than most people the difference between what gets talked about as political issues and what is really going on.

After the Proud Boys marched in Charlottesville, and Heather Heyer was murdered by a white supremacist with his car, Ward was, in his words, upset, grieving, and enraged. He went to church.

I was out of town on vacation, so I found myself in a low-slung building labeled "Church of the Nazarene." It was across the street from a trailer park. I expected the church to be full of Trump supporters who either would not mention Charlottesville or would utter some variation of Trump's false equivalency, eager to downplay the culpability of White supremacists. I contemplated whether if given the opportunity to stand up and introduce myself--as sometimes happens with visitors in churches--I might say something about Charlottesville. I wanted to push back against the darkness in my own small way.

When I walked in a few minutes late, there were about thirty people in a room that had a capacity of probably two hundred or so. I sat in the back pew on the right side. Five people at the front were leading congregational singing. There was no band, no one playing an instrument. The congregation sang along to music that was being piped over the loudspeakers from a stereo. The sincerity of the people in the room moved me.

He describes a prayer time in which people talked about their struggles to quit smoking, ask for prayers for their dad whose dog just died, and suchlike. Ward's anger started to subside. "I had been invited into these peoples' struggles and hopes simply by walking in the door." As things begin to wrap up, he raises his hand, wanting not to be a rude stranger who didn't identify himself. He told them he'd needed to pray and worship with other Christians that morning because of Charlottesville, and then he choked up and couldn't say more.

On his way out, one person after another shook his hand and thanked him for coming. One woman walked outside to catch him before he left, thanked him, and said, "I've been praying for them also down there, and for our country, and for God to fall on everybody," she said.

Ward writes, "I was reminded that retribution does not break cycles of violence and

injustice, but grace might. . . . I remembered that everyone is searching for God and for meaning. That is our universal common ground." (p. 186)

And that's what I find inspiring about today's reading from Acts. The apostles, though misunderstood and perhaps even blundering in their efforts, beaten up and thoroughly rejected, break the cycle of violence with grace. 21 "After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch."

We must persist with grace toward everyone. Persistence too. But definitely grace. And remember, sometimes the most powerful experiences of God happen in very small churches.

Let us pray:

Holy Wisdom: as we go out as apostles, tutor us in faithfulness so we are trained in using the tools of justice and hope; so we are equipped to share the good news with all; so we become skilled in compassion and grace; so we are not thrown off or discouraged by our failures.

Go now, relying on the power of God.  
Guard the good treasure God has entrusted to us  
and hold firm to the teaching of the apostles.  
Remember one another in your prayers  
and continue to offer yourselves for the gospel.

And may God give us grace, mercy and peace;  
May Christ Jesus lead us into life and faith;  
And may the Holy Spirit live within us  
and rekindle good gifts within us.

