

Sermon, 13 May 2007—Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 14:8-18; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:22—22:5; John 14:23-9

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The story of the healing in Lystra of the man who could not walk and its riotous aftermath could be pointed to as one of the funny passages in Scripture. Human beings always seem to find cross-cultural muddles funny. Remember “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” of several years ago. As Luke tells the story in Acts, this is the first time Paul preaches to non-Jews, and his enthusiasm and theirs run away with them.

Paul sees a man who has been crippled since birth staring at him intently. Realizing that the man has the faith to be healed, Paul commands him to stand up and walk, just as Jesus restored many others, just as the Hebrew prophets foretold. So Paul works a sign deeply rooted in his religion and recognizable, he thinks, as an affirmation that the Reign of God is dawning among them. The people of Lystra see this and interpret it according to their own religion, not Paul’s. They know nothing of Judaism and can’t decode Paul’s symbolic action, let alone his words. They decide that Zeus and Hermes, the ruler of the gods and his messenger, have descended in human form to visit them. This is, of course, what Paul *is* proclaiming, so the crowd must have understood enough of his Greek to get that; however, he is proclaiming it not about himself, but about Jesus, and the crowd didn’t get that at all. Since Paul is doing all the talking, they decide he must be the messenger, and they take strong silent Barnabas to be the ruler of the gods—Luke’s own little joke about Paul, who never seems to shut up and who “can’t get no respect.” The people of Lystra explode with excitement: they hustle the priest out of the temple, round up some oxen,

make garlands, and rush back to Paul and Barnabas to slaughter the oxen as an offering to them. Since neither Paul nor Barnabas understand Lycaonian, they do not grasp what is going on until the procession reaches them. Only then do they realize that this enthusiasm is not about Jesus, but about the utterly non-Jewish notion that once again the gods have put on mufti to go slumming and that the crowd believes that it has guessed their identity as Zeus and Hermes.

Of course, we laugh at what makes us uncomfortable. The Church in the first fifty years after Jesus had no idea what it might become, and the presence of unwanted Gentiles was, for decades, a source of irritation and confusion. These are the dark shadows of the Book of Acts. Whether or not this early Christian memory of Jewish hostility is entirely accurate, once Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70, Gentiles were left as the bearers of the standard. There was no rival account of the history of Christianity. Jerusalem Jews, either firm in their ancient cult or reformed as followers of Jesus, were all scattered. Gentile Christians saw that massacre as proof that God had rejected Jews in the error and stubbornness of their ways—a strange fruit that hangs from the cross even in our own day. But Jewish Christians didn't simply cease to exist. They were still present in churches around the Mediterranean in Luke's day. So even though Luke is himself the great champion of Gentile Christianity, he admonishes his own, and courteously, wisely, tells a story to remind Gentiles of their foolishness. "Remember," Luke teases, "how we Gentiles got it wrong the first time? Remember thinking Paul was Hermes and bustling around to offer him an ox? Remember he had a hard time keeping us from going through with it?"

Luke doesn't stop there, but places in Paul's mouth a brief message that is meant to summarize how to approach Gentiles with the Good News

of Jesus. Luke has Paul make similar points again in Athens, where he makes a more polished speech.

First, he says, idols are insensible objects and not worthy of human devotion. This was familiar Jewish anti-Gentile polemic. One of the Psalms sneers idols have ears but cannot hear, they have eyes but cannot see, and those who make them are like them. As living beings, we ought to worship only the living God who made all things. It was a good place to start, since Greek philosophy made similar points.

Second, God made human beings different, dispersed around the globe with our own customs. This is a very cosmopolitan comment, reflecting the age in which Luke and Paul lived. During the centuries in which Jerusalem, tiny and beleaguered, huddled between the imperial hostilities of Assyria and Egypt, such an acceptance of otherness was never voiced. But Rome at its best had brought peace and established commerce around the Mediterranean, and the result was that different cultures could now get to know each other and exchange goods. The advantage of a common market becomes the appreciation of variety; and if this range of choices seems attractive and interesting to the consumer, it is not a difficult theological step to take to say that God allows, even approves of, the difference in customs of every tribe and language and people and nation.

Third, the whole created order and our joy in it are themselves witnesses to us that God cares for us. Whatever the diversity of human cultures, this, our planet and its seasons, all human beings have in common. What all people have in common is that we have all been placed in this world that is good to us and for us. Notice that Luke has Paul say that rain and fruitful seasons, food and joy are the witnesses God has given us in doing good. The cycles and bounty of our planet are a witness to God's

goodness. But Paul points out that how we benefit from that is also a witness. Nature is not only beautiful and ordered, it also benefits us by providing food—a witness in the doing of good. And God has not only given us food, but also filled our hearts with joy—a second witness in the doing of good. Our capacity for joy is a sign that the God who made us is a good God, and good to us; and the joy we get in doing good reinforces our role in the world and our share in God’s activity as the children of God.

Luke suggests, in other words, that the message with the widest popular appeal is not the message that ancient Israelite prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus, but that a loving God, who made us and located us and cares for us, now cares for us in Jesus. Luke suggests that any evangelist, when faced with a pagan—which is once again what we are surrounded by in our own day—needs only to awaken the love latent in every human being for the wonder of Creation, its intricacy, its harmony, its self-sustaining power, and our dependence on it, and then to ask: “Isn’t it apparent that we are embedded in what is designed to keep us alive? Isn’t it obvious that Creation delights in diversity—the variety of species, the cycles of seasons, the complexity of ecosystems—and yet ensures that all this is a unity? If nature delights in doing good in these ways—creating diversity, sustaining unity—shouldn’t we as well? Isn’t it at least possible that the beauty and goodness and life that surrounds us in the natural order could be known in themselves, that we could reflect on what makes something beautiful or good or alive? And if they can be known in themselves, couldn’t they exist in themselves? After all, did all this come from nothing, or from something itself living and generative, something beautiful and good? And if there is something living and generative, couldn’t it want to be known? If it wants to be known, wouldn’t a human being, walking among us as God-with-us,

be the best way, the most immediate way, the most humanly touching and effective way, that this generative life would invite us into relationship? And if you admit that this hope is at least possible, then let me tell you about Jesus, the one I believe makes present to us beauty and goodness and life.”

That, Luke suggests, is a message Gentiles will want to hear.

This weekend we are witnessing many transitions, growth into deeper understanding and commitment. We are reflecting on the goodness that surrounds us in our own congregation. We will be observing Rite 13 in a few moments; yesterday five pews full of us were down at the Cathedral for confirmations and receptions; in the coming weeks many people associated with us will graduate from schools and colleges. It is an occasion for all of us, not only to receive these witnesses in doing good, but also to wonder how we help these young people interpret the world and discern God’s Spirit in the world, to continue in that goodness.

I trust that you and I do not want them to make the same enthusiastic mistake of the people of Lystra, which arises out a good heart quick to respond. It is easy to confuse the creature for the Creator. We don’t blunder this way out of perversity, but out of eagerness. Love looks for an object to venerate and to pursue. Energy looks for an activity to engage and to accomplish. Good will looks for a contribution to understand and to make. So all of us rush to offer sacrifice to what is as mortal as we are, not because we reject God, but because God is veiled in every good thing. Formation is not over with a ritual; all the ritual does is call our attention to the transition. The gift of the Holy Spirit is so that we can have discernment and courage and joy—and these are long term investments in life. Pilgrims further along the path have more wisdom than they realize to offer those coming along behind them. To help by giving back what you have received confirms that

gift in yourself. This was, over and over, the witness of the mentors who met with our confirmands every week: to share what you have, particularly the stories of salvation and the love of God, is to receive it again.

But the gifts are not given in one direction only. The willingness of all these young people to trust us and to participate in what we offer is their gift back to us. Even the resistance, floating up to the surface every once in a while, doesn't matter, because the steps are taken. What matters is the action taken. At its best, it reminds us that a readiness to move into the unknown is the testimony of faith. They are not only making us a gift of their example, they are also calling on us to be trustworthy as they take this step, and so offer us the gift of our own growth in faith.

This, I believe, is the proclamation of this day: our being in the pilgrimage of faith together. It is seeing the Church as a new Creation, with its own seasons and populations and joy. This is what it means to have met each other in the Body of Christ, to be in it together: diversity in unity. We affirm the diversity, which we know in Creation. We acknowledge the unity, which we know in Christ. We acclaim both as God's intention, intent to hold them together as good, which the Holy Spirit reveals to us constantly, leading us into all truth. Christ's ministry of reconciliation, which is the sanctification of this diversity in unity, is what we proclaim and pursue, to the honor and glory of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, now and forever.