

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

September 10, 2017, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Share Jesus!

Acts 14:1-28

I. Introduction:

A. Jeff's story shows some challenges sharing Jesus (and Houston update)

Good morning friends, and thanks to everyone serving those affected by Hurricane Harvey. I'm very thankful for the hard-working team of eight from Northwest who traveled to Houston this week to serve alongside Trinity Fellowship Evangelical Free Church. The team removed debris and prayed with hurting people both in Trinity's building and in homes in the community. So thanks again to these wonderful servants, and let's keep praying and giving; and stay tuned as we announce more opportunities to bless people near the coast in Jesus' name.

Now back in my junior year of college I began taking my relationship with God more seriously; praying, reading the Bible, serving, participating in small group, my heart for God and people growing.

But as I look back on that season in school and then my time in the corporate world, can I share that I struggled with sharing my faith. At first I really wanted those close to me to also experience the joy I found in Jesus, but how I went about expressing that was too direct. So if you've experienced a Christian being pushy, please accept this pastor's apology on behalf of the church. Sometimes we share the good news in a way that isn't good.

And once I was past my initial zeal, I started losing sight of the importance of sharing Jesus. In class I'd often sit next to a Christian friend and just talk with them, not looking to bless everyone. At work I'd get so focused on my challenges, my deadlines, my assignments that I didn't think much about serving my coworkers and building the kinds of relationships where we each share what's most important to us.

And though my character grew in that season, I had plenty of failures. And when I'd do something like join in gossip about a student, teacher, or coworker, I'd then feel like I shouldn't share Jesus because people saw my many flaws.

B. What can the early church teach us about sharing Jesus?

Now I'm guessing I'm not the only Christian here who's struggled with sharing Jesus. There are a variety of challenges and pitfalls. So as we continue our series on the Bible book of Acts we'll consider the question, "What can the early church teach us about sharing Jesus?" If

you've got a Bible, turn to Acts chapter 14, where we'll learn important truths on sharing Jesus from Paul and Barnabas, two very important leaders in the early church.

II. Lessons from Paul and Barnabas on sharing Jesus

A. Iconium – expect acceptance and opposition (Acts 14:1-7)

While you're turning to Acts 14, let me tell you about the book. Acts is about the early church, those first followers of Jesus. In Acts, God works through the church to spread the good news of Jesus despite great opposition. Early in the church's existence, many thousands start life changing relationships with Jesus, and God works powerfully through them.

For example, in Acts chapters 11 and 13, God weaves an amazing story of impact as the church in the city of Antioch keeps opening their hands to bless people. They generously resource people facing famine, help their neighbors start life changing relationships with Jesus, and send out their best leaders, Paul and Barnabas, so people in other cities could experience Jesus' forgiveness too. On the journey Paul and Barnabas are joined by a young Christian named John Mark. And the team sees many find joy in Jesus. But they also face great hardships, which lead to John Mark leaving the team. And then Paul and Barnabas experience so much persecution that they are expelled from an entire region.

And that's where we pick up the story this morning, as Paul and Barnabas travel to the city of Iconium, in modern day Turkey. Let's see how they share Jesus as I read Acts 14, starting in verse 1.

14 At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. ⁴ The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles.

Here in Iconium, like in the previous cities on their journey, Paul and Barnabas see both acceptance and opposition as they share Jesus. Here in Iconium God confirms Paul and Barnabas' message about Jesus by enabling them to perform miracles. And the power of the miracles and the words are so great that it compels a response from people, some believe in Jesus, while others are antagonistic.

And there are still people today who bristle at Christians sharing that Jesus is the only way to relationship with God. And if you're here this morning and feel that way, I'm really glad you're here. I'd love to grab a meal or coffee to talk more and learn from each other.

Now one way people argue that Christians shouldn't share Jesus is by saying, "All religions lead to God, so it's wrong to try to convert others to your faith." But there's a problem with this argument, it's that the person is doing the very thing they tell Christians not to do.

For when someone says all faiths lead to God so don't share about Jesus, this person is sharing how they think spirituality works and how people should live. To put religious language around it, their *belief* is that all religions are valid and they try to *convert* people to live in light of their belief by saying, "So don't share Jesus."

Now in Paul and Barnabas' case, they aren't just being told not to share Jesus, the opposition they face is way more severe. We see it in verse 5, which says:

⁵ There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶ But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, ⁷ where they continued to preach the gospel.

Opposition grows so strong that some plan to stone Paul and Barnabas to death. So Paul and Barnabas flee Iconium to the more rustic town of Lystra. Now while on earth, Jesus instructed His disciples to move on if they weren't welcome, and for us today, it's very often wise to stop sharing if the other person just made it clear they don't want to talk about Jesus.

B. Lystra – start where someone is and be willing to challenge (Acts 14:8-20a)

So let's see if the town of Lystra is interested in Jesus, starting in verse 8, which says:

⁸ In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰ and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

So as Paul shares Jesus, he notices this man who is handicapped. Perhaps Paul just sees that the man is really interested in Jesus, or perhaps God's Spirit prompts Paul to focus on this man, but whatever the reason, Paul really sees this one man. And may we also see the people around us like this. The person at the next locker who just failed their test, the person in the next cubicle with a devastating diagnosis, the work out partner with a marriage in crisis. God give us eyes to see the people all around us. Perhaps God invites you this morning to join Tim & Luisa

in really seeing the children who come to our Sunday School classes. We have over 50 kids, and many of them do not yet know Jesus, and a few even come from homes where their parents don't know Jesus, and there are opportunities every Sunday to share Jesus with them.

As Paul sees this man who is lame, may we truly see the people around us. Now Lystra is not a big city, so many in the crowd likely knew this man was lame from birth, and so they're astonished to see him jump up and walk, just on Paul's word. Let's see how they respond starting in verse 11, which says:

¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

Now this region had an old tale of the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes visiting the area.¹ In the tale only one couple shows the gods hospitality, so in anger they destroy everyone else. This crowd here before Paul and Barnabas isn't repeating that mistake, so the local priest readies a sacrifice.

And to complicate things further, Paul and Barnabas speak Greek, a second language for the crowd, so it's also possible they misunderstood some of Paul's message. Once Paul and Barnabas figure out the confusion, they respond starting in verse 14, which says:

¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵ "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." ¹⁸ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

¹ As written by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 8.611-725.

Paul and Barnabas are horrified at this blasphemy, at people worshipping them, so they tear their clothes, the appropriate response in that culture. And they tell the crowd they are only men and invite them to turn from worthless things to the living God.

Now last Sunday, in Acts 13, we saw Paul share Jesus with people already familiar with God. There he gives a brief history of Israel and shares how Jesus came as Savior to die on the cross for our sins and rise from the dead.

But this audience doesn't have that Old Testament background, so Paul starts where they're at, tailoring his message. Paul says they should turn away from their false gods to the living God who has graciously provided them with blessings even before they've acknowledged Him. And, like Paul, may we seek to understand where a person is coming from and share Jesus in a way personalized to where that individual is at.

In these verses we also see Paul is willing to challenge. He boldly calls the crowd to turn from worthless things to the living God. Now of course not every spiritual conversation requires confrontation, but we should be ready to lovingly challenge when it's appropriate.

Say a friend or even a family member says, "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual. I like to feel a connection to something beyond me, but I don't have to believe in Jesus or belong to a church to be inspired spiritually and a good person" will we always nod, smile and say, "that's great", or will we share the truth of Jesus?

It could get uncomfortable, it's often not easy, at least for me, but there's a time and place to share that in the end, a vague spiritually won't come close to giving them what they need. That what they need is to turn to the living God.

Paul speaks with that boldness here in these verses, and it looks like the crisis has been narrowly averted, Paul convincing the crowd not to worship him. But immediately another crisis comes in verse 19, which says:

¹⁹Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over.

Paul and Barnabas's opponents from the last two towns finally catch up. And they have the advantage, they're from much closer by, so they know more about the local culture and language and can unfairly paint Paul and Barnabas as suspicious foreigners who caused trouble in their towns. And as one book I read on Acts suggested, maybe they even say, "This Paul does

not follow our God or your gods, so his great power must come from sorcery.”² And to make matters worse, Paul has probably just offended the local religious leaders by refusing their sacrifice and calling their gods worthless.

And so the crowd responds in the middle of verse 19, which says:

They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.

When the locals try to worship Paul and Barnabas, Paul does the right thing, opposing their blasphemy by calling them to worship God only. And you would hope Paul’s Jewish brothers and sisters would affirm Paul’s desire that only God be worshipped among this crowd who worship false gods. Yet instead they stir up the crowd to stone Paul essentially for blasphemy, and in another irony, the locals, the ones actually guilty of false worship, now stone innocent Paul. And as Paul lies lifelessly on the ground, verse 20 brings a surprise.

²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city.

Now it’s not totally clear how Paul is doing and why he goes back in Lystra. Perhaps God miraculously healed Paul, and Paul bravely returns to encourage the believers. Or perhaps Paul wasn’t healed, and he’s too injured to immediately travel, so their best bet is to sneak back in town and treat Paul’s wounds.

C. Revisiting cities – have courage (Acts 14:20b-25)

Either way, the next day, they leave the city. Let’s read about it starting in the middle of verse 20, which says:

The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. ²¹ They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,

Wow! Paul and Barnabas just keep sharing Jesus, with many in Derbe following the Lord. And then, unbelievably, they return to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Lystra, where Paul was just stoned by locals and by opponents from Iconium and Antioch. So let’s see what Paul and Barnabas are up to in these three cities, starting in verse 22, which says:

²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. ²³ Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the

² See Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, on Acts 14.

Lord, in whom they had put their trust. ²⁴ After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, ²⁵ and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

Paul and Barnabas embody courage. Now our sufferings may not be nearly as extreme, but if you are ridiculed or ostracized for sharing Jesus, you can courageously walk back into that classroom, workplace, or home, and keep loving the people there in Jesus' name.

But it takes courage. Recently I heard a sermon where the pastor talked about the courage we need to follow Jesus, and it hit a little too close to home. He said, "Some of you are in trouble today because all of your courage is tied to your conditions. You've got conditional courage."

True courage is hard, but when by God's grace we live with it, we never know who might be intrigued as they see you love people opposing you.

Later, in Acts chapter 16, Paul again bravely returns to Lystra, the site of his stoning. And this time a man from Lystra named Timothy joins Paul in his travels, being mentored and sharing Jesus alongside Paul. The Bible books of 1st and 2nd Timothy are later written by Paul to give this Timothy guidance as he pastors later in life.

Now Timothy's not mentioned here in Acts 14, but he's from Lystra, and I wonder if Timothy's interest in Jesus was first sparked by seeing Paul love the people of his city enough to courageously return even after a stoning.

And notice also in verses 22-25 that Paul and Barnabas not only lead people to Jesus, they get them connected with a church family so they can keep growing in love and be strengthened to face hardships.

D. Antioch – get church support (Acts 14:26-28)

And Paul and Barnabas didn't just get these new Jesus followers connected to a church, Paul and Barnabas themselves also seek the church's support in verses 26-28, which say:

²⁶ From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. ²⁷ On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

So after spending about a year on the road, traveling over 700 miles by land and another 500 miles by sea, Paul and Barnabas return to their home church. They report on the amazing things God did through their difficult journey, and spend a long time being refreshed by their

church family before heading back out. And if the apostles Paul and Barnabas need this kind of encouragement from the church, we certainly do too.

III. Conclusion

A. Jesus' loving courage inspires us to share Jesus

This morning we've gleaned lessons on sharing Jesus, to expect acceptance and opposition, to really see the people around us, to start the conversation where the other person is at, to be willing to challenge, to have courage, and to get church support. And as we think about application this morning, I bet you're not surprised to hear our application is to share Jesus.

It can be easy, at least for me, to lose sight of our amazing opportunities to share Jesus. To get overly focused on what I need to get done, or on my challenges, or on what I risk by initiating a faith conversation. Our stakes aren't nearly as high as Paul and Barnabas', but there can be risks in our workplaces, schools, relationships when we share, no matter how nicely we say it, that we are all sinners accountable before a holy God and that the only way to forgiveness and eternal life is through faith in Lord Jesus.

So how do we have the courage, in the face of pressure, to keep sharing Jesus? And how did Paul and Barnabas have the courage to keep sharing even post stoning?

At Christmas-time last year I read a book entitled *Hidden Christmas*, which talks about the many stories, movies, and real-life examples of a mother staunchly defending her children against an overwhelming foe. Where does she get the courage to protect her young? It is love. And how will we get courage to share Jesus? The same way. As we see all that Jesus has done for us, it draws out our love for Him, and then we will have the courage.³

When we start to worry what others think, when we hesitate before a clear opportunity to share Jesus, let's remember Him courageously suffering so much for us, let's remember how He loves us. I once heard another pastor describe Jesus' sacrificial love for us in this way: Imagine you're half a mile from the Hoover Dam, and you see a crack suddenly form up from the bottom. And a massive force of water bursts through, and a wave five hundred feet high rushes towards you. Are you picturing it?

But then, right before that 500-foot wave sweeps you away to your death, the ground in front of you opens up and swallows every ounce of that water, not even a drop touches you.

³ Keller, Timothy, *Hidden Christmas*, 61-62.

When Jesus died on the cross, He stood between us and the rushing river of God's righteous wrath. He swallowed up every ounce into Himself, so that not a drop remains for you or me.⁴

As we see Jesus doing all this, for us, we're inspired to share Him. And encouraged to move past guilt over evangelistic failures, knowing that all our sins have been erased by Jesus, that there's always grace to start anew.

Now Jesus conquered over sin and death through courageous, sacrificial love, and I think Paul and Barnabas' victory was not in powerful miracles or sermons, but in Christ-like love giving them courage to share Jesus, even with the people who tried to kill him. Paul and Barnabas, sharing in the sufferings of Jesus, their safety less important than inviting people to join them in being held securely in the arms of God.

B. Ron's two friends show us the importance of sharing Jesus

In verse 27 Paul and Barnabas share with their church that the door of faith had opened. Northwest, that door of faith remains open, so let's keep sharing Jesus, like Hector and Ron.

So Hector's in a bicycle club, and one day a guy named Ron joins. And after some months riding together with the club, there's a time when Hector and Ron are one on one, and so Hector shares Jesus.

Ron thought he had to do enough good works to make it into heaven. So Hector tells Ron that we can never do enough to get into heaven, but that thankfully Jesus has done it for us. For Jesus lived a perfect life in our place on our behalf, and then died on the cross for our sins, and then rose from the dead. So by faith we can come to Jesus and experience forgiveness for all our sins and then participate in God's mission as we look forward to eternity with God.

That day Ron trusts in Jesus! And not only is Ron's eternity changed, his present changes as well. Ron starts studying the Bible with Hector and joins Hector here at Northwest, and at his sheet metal business the degrading pictures of women come down, the language becomes less vulgar, and a few there even join Ron in a Bible study. And later on Ron shares testimony of what Jesus has done at our Good Friday service and becomes a deacon candidate.

I had the joy of participating in Ron's deacon interview. There Ron shared about Hector leading him to Christ and the changes taking place in Ron's life and his passion for sharing Jesus, as Hector did with him.

⁴ Greear, JD, *Gospel*, 102. I didn't put quote marks because I modified the description.

In the interview Ron also shares about a man he worked closely with for years who's now retired. Occasionally, that man still stops by the sheet metal business to chat with Ron. So the first time he stops by after Ron believed, Ron shares Jesus. And his friend says, "That's great Ron, I'm a Christian too." And Ron says, "We worked together closely for 20 years, why did you never tell me about Jesus?" And his friend manages to stammer out, "Well, I didn't know you'd be interested." And Ron replies, "Why wouldn't I be interested in going to heaven?"

I don't know about you, but I find that very clarifying. We all have people we study with, or work with, or live next door to, people who are in our lives for years. But eventually, for one reason or another, those relationships will end.

And when we look back at our time with them in school, at work, in the neighborhood, what's going to really matter? Will it be being part of the "in" crowd, keeping everyone comfortable by never bringing up faith, or will it be if we loved the people near us enough to share Jesus. He's the only One Who can fix the ultimate problems we all face, the only One Who can satisfy all our longings in the end. So may those close to us never be able to say, "We were together for years, why did you never tell me about Jesus?"

Let's pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.