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Right Back at It

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Acts 14:1-7

[Paul and Barnabas in Iconium]

¹⁴ The same thing occurred in Iconium, where Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them. ⁴ But the residents of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. ⁵ And when an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, ⁶ the apostles learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country; ⁷ and there they continued proclaiming the good news.

Paul and Barnabas are out and about preaching in the synagogues. When they are in a place called Iconium (which I think sounds like the name of the medicine), by their preaching a good number of Jews and Gentiles are persuaded to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the living Christ, God come down in human form, died and risen, present and loving them like children, making them brothers and sisters to one another.

Such faith gives birth to a new community, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed *life together*. And put them on the verge of a whole new world – a world where race, religion and politics took a backseat to simple humanness.

“Jesus loves you and saves you and comes to you now,” Paul preached, “simply because you are human being, made by God.” He wrote about it later saying things like, *“in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free for in Christ we are all one.”*

But here, in Iconium, he is still preaching the sermons that will someday be that book. And for some Jews and Greeks it made sense. Their hearts were broken open, flooded with the grace-filled love of God in Christ Jesus.

For others, it was some of the most unbiblical, scandalous, outrageous and dangerous stuff they had ever heard. Will Willimon points out that Paul and Barnabas were likely in Iconium for many months, if not a couple of years. If so, I can imagine that long,

long before the synagogue leaders there began collecting rocks for a stoning, they asked for meetings.

It was a religious organization – of course there were meetings! Meetings at which they pleaded for Paul and Barnabas and other believers to stop talking about Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom Rome had executed for leading a rebellion against the empire. They had a point, of course. It seems they were even willing to compromise on some of the doctrinal issues, specifically about treating Gentiles as equals. Notice how they recruited Gentiles to help pitch their own case, because aggravating Rome was bad for everybody.

But always, Peter and Barnabas were right back at it, preaching the supremacy of Christ over all things political and all things doctrinal. The gospel is this: where the world would have us divided, categorized, and ranked, in Christ we are all the same. In Christ we are one.

Barnabas and Paul kept at it, but eventually plans for stoning were made and they skipped town – “*too bad we can't stay.*” Which is probably what the Jewish leaders were hoping for, too. Stoning is such a nasty business. Paul and Barnabas didn't go into hiding, but rather into the next town, and right back at it preaching Jesus, the Messiah, the living Christ, God come down in human form, died and risen, present and loving, teaching every human as children, brother and sister to one another.

It's always been this way, you know, with the gospel: thriving and threatened at the same time, sometimes in the same places – like Iconium. Missionaries are prone to point out that the gospel seems to thrive best where it's threatened most, 20th-century China being an often-cited example.

It is interesting to wonder whether I'd be here now, if it were dangerous? Would I bring my kids here? Would we have this *life together*, together? Would the supremacy of Christ and His grace still rule our hearts and minds, so that we fear nothing and no one in this world?

So it was in the baby church in Iconium, among our ancestors in faith. So it is now for brothers and sisters in the faith, miles and miles from here. All we can do is hold them in our hearts – as Paul wrote to the Philippians – as they hold us in theirs. Hopefully praying for our strength, as we pray for theirs. Hopefully praying for our boldness and sharing Christ to a community as in need of Christ as any community anywhere. I hope they pray for our clarity of vision, that we might see as clearly as Barnabas and Paul that humanity trumps politics, and race, and religion, and gender, and all the rest. I hope they pray for our courage to be gentle and kind and generous in a harsh and hateful and selfish world.

And, by the way, if you do not believe it is a harsh, hateful and selfish world, try driving Highway 37 now between town and my house where the speed limit is a

strictly-enforced 45 miles an hour construction zone. It tests my faith as many as five times a day some days.

We can't know, of course, what we would do or how we would live in some other reality. We only know what we shall do and how we shall live in this one, where we have every freedom, every advantage, and every opportunity to live and to tell of the goodness of God, of the risen Christ, and all of the freedom, unity, peace and joy therein.

Would you pray with me?