



**Sermons from St. Marks  
United Church of Christ  
New Albany, Indiana**



**A Character Study of Paul**

**Acts: 14:8-20**

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In looking at this passage from Acts it becomes apparent that there is a character portrait of St. Paul. His character, of course, is amazing and great.

Most, however, see his character come through late in the story when he is seized and taken to the edge of town and stoned. He fakes death and ultimately survives to live and preach another day. It is, obviously, a person of incredible character who does such a thing.

I'm not sure, however, that is the really great sign of character in this narrative. It is what happens earlier.

Paul and Barnabas heal man and the crowd is amazed and dazzled. Then the crowd comes to the conclusion that Paul and Barnabas must be gods. Barnabas is Zeus, the Chairman of the Board of the gods, and Paul is Hermes, the spokesperson for the gods and the son of Zeus.

This isn't all the strange. In our day and age we live in a time of celebrity. We have lots of celebrities for many reasons. Many who become celebrities long to be celebrities. Being famous is an end in itself.

In that time and place it wasn't so much about being a celebrity, you 'made it' when people thought you were one of the gods. We often don't realize it now, but most people in the world at that time still believed in multiple gods. It was even still an issue among Jews and Christians about believing in one God or many gods. Since Barnabas and Paul show great power, they must be gods.

Here is where character came in.

Often people say that the greatest test of character comes in the midst of adversity. I am not sure that this is correct, however. I sometimes think that the greatest test of character isn't in adversity but it comes when things are going well and we are on top of the world. When we are on top of the world it makes it easy to believe that we don't need God and we do not need other people. We enjoy the accolades that come with it.

Paul and Barnabas were faced with something awesome. People believed them to be gods. Anything that Paul or Barnabas now wanted was at their disposal. They were seen as

gods, great gods, and people would listen to anything and everything that they would have to say. Additionally, if they asked for money, people would have emptied their pockets for Zeus and Hermes. And morally----they were gods----whatever they decreed to be moral and good was moral and good. Paul and Barnabas had it all.

And what they did was breathtaking. They did not accept the accolades of the people and waded into the crowd and spoke of another who truly was God, and made it clear that they were mere mortals. The story does not end with them having a great dinner and great room at the Brown Hotel. It ends with them surviving a stoning attempt.

This really and truly is a remarkable event.

Some things really do stand out.

Paul and Barnabas demonstrate great humility and prove that they are loyal servants of God.

Micah 6:8 speaks of the three things God requires. It ultimately boils down to loving others, acting justly, and walking humbly with God.

Walking humbly with God means that we see, truly, that God is God and we are not.

Walking humbly with God is deferring glory from ourselves to God.

Walking humbly with God is ultimately bowing before God.

Three ministers were having lunch one day in a diner and they began to speak to each other about the proper posture for prayer.

One of the ministers said that the best posture was on our knees. He said that you really don't pray unless you are on your knees.

Another said that the only way you could really pray sincerely to God is if you were sitting, with your head bowed.

The other said that the one true way to pray was to lie face down on the floor and not even look up.

A man walked by them and said, "I don't know about you guys, but my most sincere prayer to God was given when I was hanging upside down on a telephone pole with one foot stuck in the wires."

Walking humbly with God is praying with humility and living with humility. Truly holy people never boast. St. Paul said it so well over and over again that when we boast, we need to boast in God's goodness and not in ourselves.

The second thing is this. The message of Paul and Barnabas does not, ultimately, win everyone over. When you speak to a group of people and they take you to the edge of town and begin throwing rocks at you, your speech was not enthusiastically embraced. Popular people do not get stoned by crowds.

The Gospel is not a Gospel about popularity or approval. Sometimes what is right and good is not that which is popular, but often that which is unpopular.

I love democracy and I can't imagine living in a nation without it. It does have a weakness however in that it sometimes gives us the wrong impression that the majority of people are always right. The majority of people may get their way, the majority of people may rule the day, but the majority of people might not always be right.

The philosopher Socrates was one of the world's greatest thinkers. He was one of the people who taught people how to question and how to think. He didn't so much tell people what to think but he looked to open people's minds to wonder. But he was a questioner and sometimes questioners are annoying.

So the majority of people in Athens felt that the world would be a better place without Socrates. He was given the choice. Get stoned by the crowd or drink hemlock. His final thoughts were recorded by Plato in *Apologia* and Socrates words are still read and still marveled at. He is honored, in our day and age, as one of history's greatest thinkers; but the majority of people in his town decided they were better off with him dead. Majority may have ruled, but it certainly wasn't right.

One of the greatest American preachers of all time was Jonathan Edwards. A lot of his sermons are pretty harsh to us now and he's not an easy guy to read. He was, however, a brilliant and captivating mind who inspired his red a great religious renewal and awakening in the American colonies. Elizabeth Nordbeck, a United Church of Christ church historian who teaches in a seminary outside of Boston used to teach at Lancaster Seminary in Pennsylvania. I took a course from her on American church history and she was emphatic that Edwards was the person who changed the religious landscape of Colonial America----and his impact is still found today.

Edwards became the most sought after thinker and preacher of his day. Oh, and yes, he was the pastor of a church in Massachusetts. He was popular and brilliant and respected by many; except the people in his own church voted, by majority, to fire him. His crime? People liked him. Obviously it was the wrong people who liked him.

One of the most profound history books I have ever read was written by Omar Bradley, one of the top American Generals during World War II. Bradley served as the head of the Veterans Administration for two years after the war and he also served as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Korean War. Bradley was, in his own right, a profoundly important person.

While working as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Truman administration

during the Korean War they faced a huge issue. In their correspondence with General Douglas MacArthur, another one of the United States' greatest generals, it was obvious that MacArthur had lost his grip and wanted to expand the war into China. The move, it was surmised, would be catastrophic and MacArthur threatened to invade China without authorization. It became obvious that he needed to be replaced in Korea. Truman had to fire him.

This was difficult because Truman wasn't all that popular and MacArthur was a true American hero. Truman's advisors, according to Bradley, suggested that Truman give them two to four weeks so that they could so tarnish MacArthur's reputation so that when Truman fired MacArthur, Truman would look good. They wanted to participate in that fine art of politics; character assassination.

Bradley said that Truman did something that demonstrated the finest character he had ever witnessed. Truman said that MacArthur was a real American hero and the nation did not need to have a hero's reputation tarnished so he fired him while MacArthur was still popular and Truman was himself not popular. Bradley said it was an action that needed to be done and Truman did it in a way that made MacArthur remain the hero and Truman wearing the mud. He did not do what the majority would have wanted, but what he felt was right.

Paul and Barnabas are faced with a choice. To give in to the crowd was to live in power and glory----but to give into the crowd would be a lie. They demonstrated the character of people who truly follow God, who walk humbly with God, and who strive to do what is right, no matter how popular or unpopular that happens to be.