

Sunday, September 25, 2005

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Paul T. Rock



You Left Who in Charge?

Acts 14

Holy God, as we sit in this ordinary place with ordinary people, thank you for your Holy Spirit that makes us special. Thank you, Jesus Christ, for being in our midst and we pray that as we think about your words this day, may they be more than just words. May they, God, be a fresh dose of your call upon our lives to be obedient disciples of yours wherever life finds us. And now may the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. Amen.

As I read through what I thought was a very engaging 14th chapter of the Book of Acts, “You Left Who in Charge?” seemed to be the sermon title that was jumping out at me. I circulated that title to the church staff so they would know where I was coming from and how to plan for Sunday worship.

Early last week we met together at our regular meeting to talk about and plan the week to come. We gathered around a conference table on the 9th floor and Randy Weber, who I must say is doing a bang-up job as the interim head of staff, cleared his throat and said, “Let’s take a look now at our upcoming Sunday service. And Paul, I couldn’t help but notice the title of your sermon, and was wondering if there’s something we need to talk about?” And of course, Randy was not able to keep a straight face, and burst into that Randy Weber giggle that shakes his whole body and the room began to erupt into fits of laughter. I quit trying to defend myself and gave thanks to God for a staff that knows how to tease each other and have fun.

I think I’m safe at this point, and Randy knows that this sermon isn’t actually about him. But if he preaches a sermon in the next couple of weeks with a title like “You Call *That* Young Adult Ministry?” – you’ll know what’s going on. This sermon is not about Randy Weber particularly, but in a general sense it *is* about Randy and it’s about Jan and Nora and me. It’s about our fellowship group leaders and small group leaders. It’s about our deacons and Stephen ministers. It’s about our eld-

“What if, rather than the superheros, superstars, super millionaires and super villains – what if, we the ordinary folks, are the ones that are actually left in charge?”

ers and trustees. It’s about everyone sitting in this sanctuary, my friends, no matter how ordinary you feel. It’s about you, it’s about us. We’re left in charge.

It’s interesting how things like the hurricanes our country has gone through recently have brought to light ordinary people who did extraordinary things – it’s always fascinating to read those stories. I’ve been looking in back issues of newspapers from across the country on-line, and I found a story the other day about a couple named Dan and Sandy Lester. They are an older couple who live outside the town of McLaurin, Mississippi, near New Orleans. Their town as well as those around them was devastated by Katrina. On the night of the storm and flooding, through some friends serving on emergency medical teams, they learned that the local hospitals were overflowing and were, in fact, no longer receiving any new patients.

So Dan and Sandy, ordinary people, who live in a blue collar neighborhood in Mississippi opened up their ordinary three-bedroom house and they said “Why don’t you just bring some people here?” And so for the next ten days, Dan and Sandy slept on their floor while every bed and every sofa and “lazy boy” in their house was filled by people who needed medical attention and couldn’t be taken in by hospitals. They had up to 25 people staying in their little house over the next two weeks. One of them was a woman over 90 years of age, on eight different prescription medications, who had to be taken care of on a regular basis. Another was a premature dehydrated baby boy who was cared for in the Lesters’ living room. When faced with circumstances like this, ordinary people like this, did heroic and extraordinary things. We are thrilled to read stories like

that about other ordinary people like us.

We love our super heroes, right? We love the superstars, supermodels and super millionaires. We love the super famous and super spiritual. We love to worship them. We also love to throw rocks at the super villains. But when we turn off the TV and close the *People* magazine, and are honest with ourselves; we really know that the everyday, ordinary things of life *are* done by ordinary people like us. We are the ones, who throughout our ordinary days, take care of things and keep this world going. We are the ones who step up to the plate when called, and do extraordinary things despite our many faults and weaknesses, and even mixed motivations.

At some level, we ordinary people of the world are the ones who *are* in charge. I don't know about you, but for me, hearing a story like Dan and Sandy's is a bit unsettling. If average people like them can do extraordinary things like this – are there things I should be doing? Do you know what I mean? It makes me think about things that I could do or should do – and really begs the question, what if, rather than the super heroes, super millionaires, super stars, or super villains, what if we, the ordinary folks, are the ones who actually have been left in charge? That can make you feel excited or it can make you feel a little bit overwhelmed. Our scripture passage for this morning relates to this phenomenon.

It starts in Acts 14, right in the middle of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey together. They were in Syrian Antioch which today would be northwestern Syria. They were gathered there with other early believers, preparing for their missionary work to proclaim the radical new message of Jesus Christ. They sailed west to Cyprus and traveled across the island preaching the *good news*. From there they went north into the province of Galatia (now Turkey) and landed in Perga, on to Pisidian Antioch and then to Iconium. That is where we find them in this passage in chapter 14 as they go from there to Lystra and to Derbe.

In the course of these adventures – traveling from city to city proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ – we see the highs and the lows. We see the eccentricities and weird things, the very normal and very mundane beautiful things of human nature laid out. We also see what I view as the illogical, improbable kind of backwards plan coming from God for the post-Jesus salvation of the world. We see God leaving the business of continuing the reconciliation, healing and salvation of the world in the hands of ordinary people.

In verse 11, things come to a crescendo in the course of these interactions. Paul and Barnabas have made their way to Lystra and Paul begins preaching in a big way. A crowd gathers and as he's preaching, Paul somehow notices a crippled man sitting in the front. He

apparently has not been able to walk for a long time, and Paul feels a surge of faith within himself. He also recognizes that there is a level of belief within this man and he says boldly, "Stand up, be healed." And this crippled man stands up and starts walking around. And the immediate reaction of the people of Lystra is to just go crazy. A miracle has happened in their midst!

Not just that, they think that the gods themselves have come down to earth and are walking among them. Barnabas, because he is taller and has a beard, they call Zeus. They give Paul the name Hermes, the messenger of the gods, because he's the one doing the speaking. They decide this is it – the gods are in our midst, the super heroes have come down to earth. The super spiritual are right here so why don't we run and get the priest from the temple of Zeus just outside the city. And we'll get hold of a couple of goats and bulls, grab some garlands and some wreaths, and bring them back here. The gods are in our midst, and we're going to have a festival!

The priest of the temple of Zeus comes walking into Lystra with the goats and the bulls and the garlands and the festival to honor the Spiritual Super Stars in their midst is about to begin. But Paul and Barnabas say "Wait a minute, you've got it all wrong. This is not happening. We are here to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ." They tear their clothes like good repentant Jews and tell the people not to do this.

But even in the face of their vehement opposition, the people still wanted to make sacrifices to them. Then some people from Iconium who had followed Paul and Barnabas got in among the group and said, "Let me tell you a couple of things about Paul and Barnabas." And they start spreading rumors and saying slanderous things about the two of them, telling things that had happened in the previous village that maybe were not so good. So in a short space of time, the crowd that was about to sacrifice bulls and goats, to lay garlands of honor and praise upon these two, pick up rocks, stone them, drag them outside the city and leave them for dead. Isn't that amazing! In the course of several hours in a day, they turn from gods into devils.

Is that shocking to anybody here? To me it's astounding that things like that can happen. But at the same time I would have to say it's also a little bit predictable, isn't it? It's how we human beings tend to act. We like to have gods in our midst, and we know what to do with devils when we find them. I have a feeling that the reason we want to worship people, to make people into spiritual super stars, gods walking in our midst, is because if we can associate ourselves with someone, a Zeus or a Hermes, then it takes a little bit of the responsibility off our shoulders actually to do the good work and to be Christ in the place that we are. You know what

I mean? It takes some of the responsibility away from us because we are in the presence of a spiritual superstar.

Couldn't you just see if things went a little bit differently that day? A couple of guys sitting around at a pub later on in Lystra talking about the day, "Yeah, I was there earlier today, when Hermes and Zeus were walking in our midst. Yeah, I was actually standing right next to Hermes and he and I got to chatting afterwards. We went out and we got a cup of tea and you know he might be coming over to my house later on in the week for a little dinner. Me and Hermes are pretty tight!" Couldn't you see that happening? We like to sidle up next to, and by osmosis maybe take some of the spirituality from, these spiritual superstars, ride on their coat-tails and own some of that glory, don't we? Maybe it's just me.

We know what to do with the gods in our midst and we certainly know what to do with the devils. We know how to stone them and cast them from our midst. But the crazy thing about this engaging chapter of Acts is that it starts with the story of miracles and gods in our midst, and the stoning, and ends up with a very ordinary couple of verses. Paul and Barnabas go back and revisit the villages that they had been through on their way to Lystra and Derbe. On their way, in verse 22 and 23, it says this, "As they went back through the towns they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith saying, 'It is through persecution that we must enter the kingdom of God.' After they had appointed elders for each church, with prayer and fasting, they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe."

When the dust settles, when the stones have been thrown, the crowds have dispersed and the gods and the devils are gone from the religious arena, it is the local church filled with ordinary people that remains. Meeting under a fig tree, in someone's living room, or in a town hall, these local churches are led by elders. In fact that word *elder* when translated from Greek to English is the word *presbyter* – does that word sound familiar to anyone?

We, as Presbyterians believe in the same thing – that it is ordinary folks from the regular community who are ordained and brought into service to lead the church. We know that people, no matter how they come across, really aren't devils or gods. And we know that when we're honest with ourselves, the most important things that happen in a spiritual community, like this one, happen because of regular members like you and me. Ordinary people called by God to do extraordinary things to continue the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. *You left WHO in charge?*

God left you in charge, brothers and sisters, and as

fantastic as it might sound, those of you sitting in this sanctuary today are the hope of the world. God is at work in and through your lives, whether you recognize it or not. I have seen it too many times in the lives of others or have experienced it in my life and my life with my family, to doubt it any longer.

Recently I had the opportunity to listen to a woman, a member of our church, talk about a journey that she has been on over the past eight months. After a routine visit to her doctor for a mammogram in January, Holly found out that she had a lump. A biopsy revealed an aggressive cancer within that lump. Holly has been a part of this church family for a number of years and this church has meant a lot to her. But as she began this time of surgery and chemotherapy and radiation, she began looking at her own mortality and life in ways that the fast pace of a New York woman's life had not permitted before.

Something about the church struck Holly in a way that it never had. The church became a place of healing and of family, in mundane but very powerful ways. What I think was happening to Holly was that the church was becoming the presence of Jesus to her. When friends stopped over to Holly's home each week just to sit and cry with her, since there was a lot of crying to be done, I believe that was the spirit of Jesus Christ working through those people at those times, weeping with her.

When she got those phone calls and those cards and messages, I believe that was Jesus speaking to her. When she came into this place and worshipped in a new way and heard the sounds of the hymns and spoken words, that was Jesus wrapping His arms around her in ways she hadn't experienced before. When people just held her hands and looked into her eyes because they'd been through the same thing, that was Jesus! That is what we're called to be, brothers and sisters!

And I've experienced it in many stories like Holly's. Stacey and I have been blindsided by God's love in ordinary ways like this. We've been touched by and healed by Jesus in so many ways that I just can't doubt it anymore, so I've just given up. And I've given my life to the church. The church filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ because I want to be a part of this illogical, irrational plan that apparently God has crafted; that He would use us ordinary folks to redeem and to reconcile and to save this world of his.

I want you to do something for a second. I know this is hard for Presbyterians but I want you to just look around. And the way you do that is to just turn your head like this. Just look around for a second. Look around at the people sitting here. I know this is difficult but just try it. You're going to be fine. Is everybody okay? Good. The people that you see sitting in this sanctuary

are some people that you know, and you know that they're ordinary, right? Well you are looking at the hope of the world brothers and sisters. You're looking at the community. You're looking at the vessel through which God has chosen to pour the spirit of Jesus Christ, to continue the work of Jesus Christ in this world. We are the hope of the world.

I know many of you don't see yourself that way – maybe most of us don't. We don't see ourselves as world savers. Like me, you're not perfect and you do things you wish you didn't do, or you don't do things that you wish you did do. I know that you're struggling with things like eating disorders – you eat not quite enough or too much. I know you struggle with your anger and the way you deal with conflict and the way you lash out at times. I know you're not perfect in that way. I know that you feel like a failure because you've been out of work for too long, or because things went really bad at work this week, or you may feel like a failure in a major relationship you're in right now. Or maybe your family's falling apart and maybe you're seeing sides of yourself you just don't like at all. I know, I know. Same here!

But if we're waiting for Zeus and Hermes to walk into our midst folks and do this job, we're living in a fantasy land because this is as good as it gets. We are the hope of the world, brothers and sisters. And if you have to be in a place surrounded by other faulty, ordinary folks trying to get together to be filled with the

spirit of Christ to transform, to redeem, to save this world, this isn't a bad community to be a part of!

If you're feeling inadequate in your knowledge of the faith, today you can sign up for a CCS class, or become a part of a small group that will help you grow. On any Saturday you can show up here and help with a group of people who cook meals and deliver them to home-bound elderly neighbors. Every morning you can come and serve coffee to our homeless friends on the steps and get their day started and be one of the few happy faces that they see in their lives. You can spend the night in our homeless shelter, 365 days a year; you can become an usher or a greeter and welcome others as the face of Christ to them in this place.

Today we're having a forum right here in this place to see how Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church can be part of the solution to the problem of homelessness in the city of New York. This is a good place to be because the spirit of Christ is at work here.

When you leave this place today, I hope you have a new understanding of the world in which we live, and of this crazy, stupid, illogical plan that God has to save this world through ordinary people like you and me and those in the pews around you. Our God is longing to touch and heal and save, *through you*, ordinary people who are filled by the extraordinary spirit of Jesus Christ. God is calling you to change this world. Let's get to work. Amen.

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