



FALL REVIVAL

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 7, 2012

(See the interview with Revivalist Charles E. Booth featured in today's Cultural Resource unit.)

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Lection – Acts 14:8-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 8) In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. (v. 9) He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, (v. 10) said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And the man sprang up and began to walk. (v. 11) When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” (v. 12) Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. (v. 13) The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. (v. 14) When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, (v. 15) “Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. (v. 16) In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; (v. 17) yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” (v. 18) Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them. (v. 19) But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds. Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

(v. 20) But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Though most of us can recall spending a week sitting in late-night church services, the idea of revival could mean something different for African Americans in light of the events of this year's Black History Month. The one month nationally dedicated to celebrating the global contributions cultivated in the *sturm und drang* caverns of black folks' souls¹ saw the untimely deaths of our cultural paragons, ranging from a Civil Rights leader (Patricia Stephens Due) to a broadcast pioneer (Don Cornelius) to a virtuosic diva (Whitney Houston). Hence, perhaps the stereotypically "churched" definition and liturgical apparatus of revival can be nuanced this fall to take on the medical understanding of resuscitation: breathing into beings whose very existence may be crippled by the troubles and the sufferings of this world.²

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Acts 14:8-20

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

One of the moments in this text to which many can relate is the characterization of what it means to be crippled. So often in our (post)modern culture, any form of disability, especially a physical one, is code for "social death." Essentially, insofar as disability is often cast as the inability for one to exert his or her full humanity, questions abound in the social sphere as to how one can live, have a reasonable quality of life, with a disability. Compound this preoccupation with being bodily debilitated with certain socially created funerals (those for gay folk and those for the poor) and we recognize how a large swath of the population cannot win for losing because from birth many of them are considered dead on arrival.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In this pericope, we initially encounter a man who is crippled from birth (14:8). Unable to use his feet and hence walk, this man happens upon what could be read as a fall revival in Lystra. Paul and Barnabas arrive here after preaching people into a frenzy in Iconium and performing miracles, receiving mixed reviews and subsequently being expelled (14:1-8). Yet when Paul and Barnabas come upon this man, the first question we must raise is how does a man who cannot walk muster up the mobility to make it out to one night of the fall revival?

Did the meandering of Paul and Barnabas make for a happenstance encounter in the church parking lot? Did someone put the man on the back of a donkey and bring him to worship? Or did the man strengthen his other senses, in light of his disability, and literally drag himself to the church house? In any one of these circumstances, the man was undoubtedly tired but not enough to let his now-heightened senses go to waste. He sat and listened, and so attentive was his sensorial engagement that his countenance alone clued the preacher, Paul, into the man's urgent quest for bodily revival (14:9).

However, after seeing the physically crippled man healed, the mentally crippled assume their God have caused the healing. "The gods [Hermes and Zeus] have come down to us in human

form!” (14:11), they exclaim. This mentally crippled posture is not necessarily due in part to those in the crowd espousing what is deemed a “social ill.” Rather, as Reinhold Niebuhr would say, fully aware of their finitude, members of the crowd pridefully boycott their humanity to assume divinity.³ Furthermore, they engage in a kind of reaction formation by going to Zeus’s temple outside of town to bring sacrifices on behalf of a distant (and dare we say long gone) “god.” Yet the living God is right there in their midst (14:11-13).

Next, Paul and Barnabas break into their own frenzy, rending their clothes and rebuking the crowd for being so totally wrong. In essence, the apostles’ reproach attempts to disable the mentally crippled (14:14-17). However, this public disdain is met with harsh responses, both materially (14:18) and bodily (14:19b). As stated by Toni Morrison, this apostolic project at mental rehabilitation is suggestive of the future “being ripe, outrageously rich in its possibilities.”⁴ Nonetheless, the Jews’ arrival in Lystra and winning the crowds to their side only to then stone and drag Paul out of town proves that “unleashing the glory of that future require[s] a difficult labor, and some may be so frightened of its birth they will refuse to abandon their nostalgia for the womb.”⁵ However, the believers themselves revive the very person who initially revived the physically crippled man and intended to revive the mentally crippled crowd (14:20).

At the next revival we attend, who will be revived? Who will leave less crippled? What are we willing to endure for such revival to happen?

Celebration

When Paul is perceived to be at his lowest—dead and dragged out of town—his fellow believers encircle him and resuscitate him. His fellow believers revive him after he has been beat down. The good news here is that after being endowed with divine hope AND being insured and assured that miracles, even from our own hands, can still happen, we can ultimately revive each other!

Part of the true meaning of revival is the knowledge that through the power of God as revealed in the person and works of Jesus Christ, we can disable and/or resuscitate our various crippled states. Or better yet, the nature of revival is the understanding that although all of us are crippled in some way, in God’s estimation, we serve a God who desires our healing and our wholeness.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: Shouting, speaking in a loud voice (v. 10); ripping and tearing of clothes (v. 14); wailing; stones hitting flesh and earth (v. 19); foreign languages being spoken (v. 11);

Sights: Someone who is different (a crippled man) (v. 8); a man jumping up and walking (v. 10); crowds; Paul being stoned, thus there is blood and bruising, and Paul being dragged (v. 19); believers coming to Paul’s aid; and

Smells: People sweating from being outside and engaged in a brawl.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

Regardless of how forces choose to harshly characterize the disabilities of others, we can counteract such character assassination endeavors by enfolding and encircling each other, in love and truth, in order to let the circle be unbroken! As well, the good news for fall revival is that often fanfare is unnecessary for someone to be made whole.

Being instantly made whole does not necessitate an instant performance of festival proportions. At times, a contrite heart and heightened senses prove that although God may move like a rush and mighty wind, God also whispers.

Notes

1. Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folk, Reprint. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.
2. Neto, Rodolfo Gaede. Pelas dores deste mundo, Translated by S. Monteiro and J. Lockward. New York: General Board of Global Ministries, GBGMusik, 2004.
3. Niebuhr, Reinhold. The Nature and Destiny of Man: I. Human Nature. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964.
4. See Toni Morrison's letter endorsing then-Senator Barack Obama. Online location: <http://www.observer.com/2008/toni-morrison-letter-barack-obama> (accessed 12 April 2012).
5. Ibid.