

***Beware Vain Things***  
**North East United Methodist Church**  
**June 23, 2019**  
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*At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.*

-Acts 14:8-18 NASB

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Following his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul, the one who had spent his time persecuting Christians, became a great man of God, taking the Word of God throughout the Mediterranean. On the road to Damascus Paul had met Jesus...Jesus had spoken to him...and now He carried the message of "*salvation in Christ*" to peoples of all nations.

Barnabas was active in the Jerusalem church, caring for the poorer members of that community...the scriptures tell us that he was "*a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and*

*strong in faith*"...Barnabas took Paul and introduced him to the apostles...believing that this man who had previously attacked Christians had truly been changed by the Savior...

Together Paul and Barnabas set out around 47-48 AD on what we know as Paul's first missionary journey...Our scripture today finds Paul and Barnabas in the southern region of Galatia, modern day Turkey, in a city called Lystra. It was to the churches throughout this region Paul would later write his letter to the Galatians.

V. 8 - *"At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked."*

Paul looked at this man *"with crippled feet"* and saw something...V. 9 - *"This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well..."* Paul sensed something in this man...a spiritual openness...an understanding that he needed divine help...

So Paul...V.10 - *"...said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped up and began to walk."*

The pagan crowd reacted to this miracle...V. 11-12 - *"When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods*

*have become like men and have come down to us.” And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.”*

They assume that the two of them are gods who have come to earth in human form.

There was a legend in Lystra. It was a story told about a time that Zeus and Hermes came to earth in disguise. No one in the land showed them hospitality except two old peasants, Philemon and his wife Baucis. As a result, the whole population except for Philemon and Baucis was wiped out by the gods. Philemon and Baucis were made the guardians of a splendid temple and were turned into two great trees when they died.

So when Paul healed the crippled man, the people of Lystra were determined not to make the same mistake again and quickly wanted to show respect and hospitality and worship to these gods come to earth by sacrificing to them.

*V. 13 - "The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds."*

Paul and Barnabas react in disgust. They show their revulsion to the blasphemous false worship by tearing their clothes, a sign of mourning and remorse. V. 14 - *"But*

*when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes...."*

They make it clear to the people of Lystra...V. 15 - they *"...rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God..."*

And instead of allowing people to focus their attention on them, they attempt to refocus them on God. They cry out...V. 15-17...they want to focus the people on *"...a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."*

Paul and Barnabas want to turn the people of Lystra from their idols just as God wants to turn us from our idols today. Remember...the very first commandment is *"You shall have no other gods before me"* (Exodus 20:3).

We cannot assume that we are so different from the people of Lystra...we must not think of idols and idolatry simply in terms of worshipping mythological gods like Zeus and Hermes, or kneeling at night to some animal or other image carved in wood...

In biblical terms, idolatry is worship of anything other than God. Colossians 3:5 links idolatry with covetousness; when we want something so much that we covet it, the thing has become an idol. We seek it rather than God. The idols in our lives are those things which we demand, which we feel we must have, in order to be happy...to experience joy...to feel significant...

I love this quote from Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift...*“The tiny Lilliputians surmise that Gulliver's watch may be his god, because it is that which, he admits, he seldom does anything without consulting.”* Time, technology, our cell phones and computers, Facebook...these can become our idols when we covet them, feel we cannot live without them...when we escape to them in the midst of our stress, our frustration, our hurt...rather than going to God...

Idols are often called vanities or vain things throughout scripture...they are called vanities, a lie, or lying vanities, as opposed to a living and true God because they are unreal...they have no power to help...placing our confidence in them is in vain...

Idols can be anything...anything that competes for our attention more than God...money, sports, work, pleasure, others' approval, politics, sex, hobbies, famous people, food, exercise, our homes and yards and

automobiles...even our children and family...even good things can become idols...the moment something becomes an end in itself rather than something to lay at God's feet...when someone or something replaces God at the center of our lives...when it becomes what we pursue...what we cannot let go of...what we identify with...it has begun to climb, if it hasn't already arrived, to the status of an idol.

And idols are not only out there...outside the doors we entered this morning...idols are within these walls as well...

Henry Ward Beecher was one of the great preachers of the 19th Century. He was ill one Sunday, so a substitute pastor walked up to the pulpit as the worship service began. Seeing that Dr. Beecher would not be speaking that day, a number of people got up and headed for the door. The substitute preacher said, "*All those who came to worship Dr. Beecher this morning may leave. All those who came to worship the Lord, may stay in their seats.*" Everyone sat back down.

The church is filled with idols. People, crosses, altar tables, specific types of music, traditions, items donated in honor of someone...even the building itself can become an idol...Often things in the church begin to be worshipped rather than the God they point to, the God they represent...

There is only One...one thing...one person...we should worship in this church...in our lives...Psalm 100:4 - *"Enter HIS gates with thanksgiving, and HIS courts with praise! Give thanks to HIM; bless HIS name!"*

Kyle Idleman, in his book, gods at war, explains that there are several questions we can ask to see if we are worshipping idols in our lives. Are you ready to have your toes stepped on?

(1) What disappoints you?

Excessive or too much disappointment reveals that we have placed intense hope and longing in something other than God.

(2) What do you complain about the most?

If you constantly complain about finances then maybe money is an idol in your life. If you constantly complain about what people think of you perhaps what people think matters more than it should. If you constantly complain about the kind of year your sports team is having perhaps sports has become your god.

(3) Where do you make financial sacrifices?

The Bible says that where your treasure is that is where your heart is. Where your money goes shows what god is winning your heart.

(4) What worries you?

Whatever it is that wakes you, or keeps you up at night, has the potential to be an idol.

(5) Where is your sanctuary?

Where do you go when you are hurting? Do you go straight to God? Or do you go to the fridge for comfort food? The television for escape? To the phone to vent? Where we go when we are hurting says a lot.

(6) What infuriates you?

Do you get mad when someone cuts you off in traffic, embarrasses you, doesn't treat you with respect? Can you not stand to lose? Maybe your quick temper reveals the oldest idol of them all - the god of me.

(7) What are your dreams?

Do your daydreams give God glory or do they reveal future visions of your own glory, fame, and fortune?

God will challenge you constantly with two words: "*You Choose.*" You choose between me and money. You choose between me and your career. You choose between me and that relationship. You choose between me and the house. You choose between me and your music preferences, your favorite television show, a sporting event, your traditions. You choose between me and your family.



Idleman writes, *"If you keep watch over your own heart, you'll face those dichotomy moments, those fork-in-the-road moments. He won't give you the option of making him one of many. There is no room there for anyone or anything but himself."*

Paul and Barnabas wanted the people of Lystra to choose...to choose Jesus...to choose correctly...to turn from their idols...They rushed into the crowd and cried out, we *"...preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them."*

I thank God for grace...for mercy...for understanding...as I fight the idols that have made their way into my life...and I have many idols I do battle with...

But the one that has the greatest pull...the one that is constantly pulling me down...pulling me away from God...is the god of "me"...

My greatest idol is "me"...and I am not alone...this is the idol that everyone of us does battle with...and we battle it everyday...

How often do I believe I can somehow come up with a better plan for my life than the Creator of the universe could design? How often does the god of "me" take over

and I worry over and grapple with and plan my future instead of giving it to God?

How often throughout my life have I dealt with insecurity, consumed with what others think of me, scared of failing...? I am self-conscious...self-conscious because when I allow myself to be god, when I place the idol of "me" at the center of my life, it becomes all about me. I've been hurt. I've been mistreated. I've been criticized. I've failed. I've not been affirmed.

There is a lot of "I" in those statements.

Yet, if God is placed on the throne...if God is at the center...when the criticisms come...when people question my calling...when you and I don't receive the affirmation we need...with God at the center, we will hear instead...

*John 1:12 - "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..."*

*Ephesians 1:5 - "...he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will..."*

*Jeremiah 1:5 - "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart..."*

1 Peter 2:9 - *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession..."*

1 John 3:1 - *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"*

Ephesians 2:10 - *"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."*

Jeremiah 29:11 - *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."*

What idols in your life is God challenging you to do battle with?...Pray...ask God to help you let go of the things of this world that have a hold on you...place Him on the throne of your heart, at the center of your life...may He no longer be in second place or third place or fourth...let Him take the place over the smaller gods that have taken up so much room in your life...especially let Him take the place over the god of "me"...

Hear Paul and Barnabas crying out in the streets of Lystra...Choose...we *"...preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them"...*Choose.