

August 9, 2015
Church Planting
Knocked Down, Not Out
Acts 14:8-20

Opening words: In 1858 the Illinois legislature--using an obscure statute--sent Stephen A. Douglas to the U.S. Senate instead of Abraham Lincoln, although Lincoln had won the popular vote. When a sympathetic friend asked Lincoln how he felt, he said, "Like the boy who stubbed his toe: I am too big to cry and too badly hurt to laugh." This is my question for you today. When was the last time you were disappointed? Perhaps, this is a better question. How do you handle your disappointments?

This is sermon number thirty in my sermon series called *Church Planting*. During the summer months, I have been preaching through the Book of Acts. This is no small task, because Acts has so much to offer. I believe the Holy Spirit is vital to our future success. Human effort and determination are not enough to revive the church. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally, and it must be the Holy Spirit who revives the church again. With this understanding, let us look at our scripture lesson for today, Acts 14:8-20. Let me call this message *Knocked Down, Not Out*.

Acts 14:8-20 In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰ and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. ¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵ "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." ¹⁸ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. ¹⁹ Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

When was the last time you were disappointed? You can admit it. Everyone experiences disappointment. History is filled with disappointed people. Let me give you a few famous examples.

Alexander the Great conquered Persia, but broke down and wept because his troops were too exhausted to push on to India.

Hugo Grotius, the father of modern international law, said at the last, "I have accomplished nothing worthwhile in my life."

John Quincy Adams, sixth President of the U.S., wrote in his diary: "My life has been spent in vain and idle aspirations, and in ceaseless rejected prayers that something would be the result of my existence beneficial to my species."

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote words that continue to delight and enrich our lives, and yet what did he write for his epitaph? "Here lies one who meant well, who tried a little, and failed much."

Cecil Rhodes opened up Africa and established an empire, but what were his dying words? "So little done, so much to do." When was the last time you were disappointed? When was the last time you felt knocked down? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Let us look at the scripture lesson together.

Once again, we find ourselves in the fourteenth chapter of Acts. By now you should know that Paul and Barnabas are on their first missionary journey. To be more exact, they are on the island of Cyprus. This week we are in the town of Lystra. As with all new ministries, their expectation must have been high. They must have dreamed of winning the whole community to Jesus. Their evangelistic efforts in that town began with the community's saddest citizen. According to the text, this gentleman had never walked. It is safe to say he was a professional beggar; he existed on the compassion of others. His friends or family placed him in his spot in the morning and took him home at night. He was a common sight. The whole community saw him as a victim, but Paul saw more. He asked the man to do something he had never done, walk! You know what happened. The man got up and walked. There should have been a happy ending to the story, but the crowd doesn't understand. To Paul and Barnabas, the healing was performed to demonstrate the power of God. This is where the story falls apart. To the people of Lystra, the miracle proved that Paul and Barnabas were gods. Have you ever done something for the right reason but everything went completely wrong? They tried to explain their actions, but their words fell on deaf ears. Before it began, their grand expectations for that town were shattered. Then, things got even worse. People from the former community showed up and incited the crowd against them. Paul is stoned and left for dead outside of the city. Some say Paul was resurrected. Others say Lystra had the worst coroner in the history of the world. Regardless, Paul lived after the stoning. He got up, and along with Barnabas moved on to the next community, Derbe.

As I worked on the message, I found this story to be odd. The question that must be answered is this one. How does this odd story help us to live out the faith? How does this story help us to be a little more like Jesus? The answer comes from distilling the story down to its basic element. It is not a story about being left for dead. No one here

has ever been left for dead. Our local coroner's office does a fine job. It is not a story about stoning. No one here has ever been stoned with stones. No one here has ever been resurrected. Once you are dead, you are out of here. The common element that speaks to us is the universal and timeless emotion of disappointment. When was the last time you were disappointed? Paul and Barnabas had such high expectations for Lystra. When was the last time your expectations didn't match your reality? When was the last time you were knocked down?

Life is filled with disappointing events. It may have been the time you bought a new home. It seemed perfect, until the first rain came. You walked down the stairs and saw your wet basement. It may have been the time an old friend came to visit. You counted the days down, but you got sick on the big day. You feasted alone on saltines and ginger ale. It may have been the time your children parted their way out of college or your parents decided to move back to Ohio. Why didn't they study? Why didn't they stay in Florida? It may have been the time your favorite National Basketball Association team lost in the finals. I could go on but I won't. You get it. We all understand disappointment because life is filled with disappointments. When was the last time you experienced disappointment? When was the last time you were knocked down? Listen to the next line. The text is not about enduring life's disappointments, it is about enduring disappointments in ministry. When was the last time you were disappointed trying to serve God?

There is not one ounce of selfishness in the story for today. Paul and Barnabas entered that community because they wanted to do something good, they wanted to do something for God. They ended up disappointed and wondered why this all powerful God, who resurrected Jesus, didn't help them. Have you ever wondered why God didn't help you? When was the last time you were disappointed trying to do something for God? It may have been the time you organized vacation Bible school. You were looking for a big crowd of happy children, but only a handful came. It may have been the time you scheduled special music for a special program, but only a handful came. It may have been the time you ordered twelve pizzas for youth group, but only two youth came. It may have been the time you cooked 150 chicken dinners to raise extra funds for the church and only sold 47. There is no other way to say it. You were knocked down and disappointed. Have you ever said, "I will never do that again"? If you have ever experienced disappointment while serving God, say, "**Amen!**" The story illustrates it for us clearly; true ministry is filled with disappointments.

On Wednesday evenings, I have been hosting a book study. It is not a big group; there are about twelve. We have been looking at Adam Hamilton's book, *Revival*. It explores the life and the faith journey of the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley. Last week, we looked at chapter five. It told us we were saved to serve. The discussion was honest and lively. Some began to share the times in their lives when they felt disappointed or knocked down trying to serve God. One of the saints in the group reminded us that our disappointments are grounded in our own expectations. We

expect certain results from our efforts, but only God knows the true outcome. I was always taught that we were called to be faithful, not successful. Our understanding of success and God's understanding of success are light years apart. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

When I came to this church in 1994, I had big dreams. The reason is simple. During my lifetime, the mainline Protestant church has been dying. Our branch of the church peaked out in 1957, when 57% of the United States belonged to a church. Every year that percentage has been dropping. It is now under 50%. In order to prevent our demise, my generation of clergy have been inundated with church growth principles. We were told that any church could grow. All you had to do was discover the needs of the church's community and start ministries to meet those needs. The models that we were to follow were Saddleback Church in California and Willowcreek in Illinois. If your church didn't grow, then you were labeled as a loser. I have never wanted to be a loser, so I longed for church growth. On the night that I was interviewed to be the minister of this church, I wondered how large I could grow this church.

This is the problem. This is not southern California or the greater Chicago area. We are located in the Mahoning Valley. Our population base isn't exploding, it is imploding. According to census reports, in 1970 the population in Mahoning County was 303,424. It is estimated that in 2013, the population of Mahoning County had dropped to 233,869. That means we have lost approximately 70,000 people in 43 years. When I graduated from high school in 1975, the city of Warren alone had 68,000 residents. In other words, there are fewer of us all the time. How many people do you know who have left this area looking for work? How many people do you know who have left this area looking for better weather? That means expanding any business is extremely hard. I don't care what business. However, I am a church growth person, and the numbers are everything. There was a period of several years that I wrestled with this reality. In spite of these facts, our church has experienced some success. However, in my opinion, it wasn't enough. I will be honest with you, there was a time when I felt true personal disappointment. I just wasn't able to turn Western Reserve into a megachurch. I just wasn't gifted enough. Then, I preached a sermon series on John the Baptist. It changed everything.

Do you remember John the Baptist's story? He was born to an elderly couple, Zachariah and Elizabeth. The Bible doesn't say it, but I am sure one of them was 58 years old (smile). John the Baptist was a cousin of Jesus who did great things for God. Yet, he lived in Jesus's shadow. Oh, he had his supporters; some believed he was the Messiah. However, John knew his place - he was only the forerunner. But, being the forerunner was good enough for him. He was not interested in worldly success. He was interested in doing the will of God. That is why that series spoke to me. I needed to substitute my expectations with God's will. It didn't happen in an instant or a few days. However, it did happen. My disappointment was replaced with satisfaction. I wasn't called to be successful, I was called to be faithful.

I know three things. First, I know I am supposed to be here. I do not have to be here; I get to be here. I need you more than you need me. God will tell me when my time is done. Second, I know God's definition of success is different from the world's definition of success. How far are you willing to trust God with your success? Third, I am going to work hard so I don't disappoint God. When was the last time you disappointed God? If you are tired of being disappointed, then do one thing: replace your expectations with God's will. You are called to be faithful, not successful. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

One of the good people related to this church is the owner of the daycare, Bonnie. On the rare occasions we are here together, we talk. There is no agenda. At some level we have become friends. One day, I was in her office talking about nothing. Out of nowhere, she said to me, "Russ, can I be honest with you? I can't believe you are still here. I thought you would have moved away a long time ago. You seemed so ambitious when we met." She closed by saying, "I'm glad you are still here." I responded, "Me too." If you want to survive doing ministry, then forget your expectations and surrender to God's will. We are called to be faithful, not successful. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**