Acts 13:1-3; 14:8-18; Matthew 10:40-42 *The Power of God in Human Form*

*Bill Reinhold, for the Sanctuary House Church Fifth Sunday.*

It is no wonder that pleas for healing and accounts of healing occupy a large part both of our daily lives and of Scripture. Life in all of its many forms on earth is wonderful – beyond our comprehension! Yet, the reality of illness – of distortions of creation – plagues us today every bit as much as it did our most remote ancestors.

Marisol – an immigrant from Honduras – walked 100s of miles carrying her daughter, Liliana, in her arms to get treatment for Liliana’s condition. While I doubt that anyone of us would have been able to do what Marisol did, there is little that we would not do to secure healing for a loved one.

The link between healing and our faith is as old as our earliest records show. The Psalms are full of pleas for healing – as are our Prayers of the People each Sunday. The accounts of Elijah and Elisha are filled with stories of healing. And one of the hallmarks of Jesus’ ministry was the healing of all sorts of diseases. Not only was Jesus known as a healer, but he commanded his disciples to go throughout the countryside “healing the sick who were there.”

Following the Ascension of Jesus the healing of a man born lame by Peter and John confirms to all that the power of Jesus is accessible to his disciples. The declaration of Peter that the man who was known to all for sitting on the steps to the temple asking for alms had been healed by the power of Jesus caused a celebration among the people, but an angry response from the religious leaders who had condemned Jesus and were not eager to have his name mentioned ever again.

Just as the healing of the man at the temple in Jerusalem by Peter and John signaled their authority in the Early Church, so the healing of another man born lame at another temple signals that Paul and Barnabas are also authorized/empowered to carry out God’s work on earth.

In the opening verses of Acts, Jesus sends the disciples out as his witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Thirteen chapters later the church in Antioch – which was itself the result of this first wave of Christian missionaries – sends out Paul and Barnabas as their missionaries.

The results of their mission were decidedly mixed. At first, everywhere they went they received a warm welcome in the Jewish synagogues. But this welcome soon turned to anger and even hostility when it became clear that they were preaching that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah – the Son of God.

Having been chased out of a series of synagogues, Paul and Barnabas came at last to Lystra. Here Paul is speaking to the crowd – not in the Jewish synagogue, but in the public square. As he is preaching about Jesus he saw a man sitting there who (in Luke’s description) “could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth.” Compare this to the way Luke describes the man back in Acts 3: “A man lame from birth was being carried in.”

Luke underlines the similarities between these two events again when he tells what happened in both cases. In Acts 2 Peter is described as “looking intently at the man” and in Acts 14, Paul “looked at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said to him in a loud voice, ‘stand upright on your feet’ and the man stood up and began to walk.”

In Acts 3 the crowd praises the God of Israel when they saw this man that they knew well “walking and leaping and praising God in the Temple.” In Lystra, the crowd also begins to celebrate. However they praise – not the God of Israel – but the gods they knew.

This is no surprise since, not far from Lystra, was the site of another temple to Zeus – the chief god of the Greeks.

About this same time, the Roman author, Ovid, collected the stories of the Greek and Roman gods. In his book, Metamorphoses, Ovid tells of an occasion when the Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes, disguised themselves as human beings and went to the humble home of a couple named Baucis and Philemon who lived in this very same region of Asia Minor. The couple, poor as they were, took the men in for the night without knowing that they were really gods. The next day the visitors disclosed themselves as gods and made the couple priests of a temple to Zeus – a temple not far from Lystra.

No wonder then that the priests of this temple to Zeus rush to bring bulls to sacrifice to these “gods” who have visited them and healed the man lying right outside of their own temple!

Luke, once again, displays his skill as a storyteller. While the crowd is busy deciding which of these men is Zeus and which is Hermes AND while the priests are busy setting up the bulls with their flowered wreathes ready for sacrifice, Barnabas and Paul are clueless as to what is going on since everyone is talking – not in the Greek that Paul has been using to preach to them – but in the local Lycaonian language.

In many parts of the world it is not uncommon for people to speak two, three, or even more languages. I remember one occasion when I was working in Kinshasa, Zaire. I was in the open air “bread market” buying 40 loaves of bread for a trip several of us were about to make into a rural area. I spoke to the women there in Lingala, the local language. No one woman had 40 loaves of bread to sell so they had to work among themselves to come up with my order. As they did so they began to wonder to themselves in their home language of Tshiluba what was this White guy going to do with 40 loaves of bread. I didn’t let on that I grew up speaking their language and just waited patiently while they gathered a half-dozen loaves here, 4 there until they had 40 ready for me to buy. Only then did I greet them in their mother tongue – much to the embarrassment and delight of the ladies.

Like these ladies in the bread market, the people in Lystra spoke both Greek and Lyca­onian, but Paul and Barnabas only spoke Greek. When, at last, it became clear to the Apostles what was going on they tore off their clothes and rushed into the crowd proclaiming loudly that they were not gods at all – but merely human beings like everyone else. To fiercely monotheistic Jews like Paul and Barnabas to be mistaken for gods was unthinkable since there could not be any other god but YHWH, creator of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them.

They had come, Paul goes on to say, to bring good news that there is but one God – the God of Israel. This God had spoken directly to the people of Israel, but even so had also left a witness to the rest of the world in the regular arrival of rains in their season which resulted in the production of both food and joy.

Paul therefore pleads with them to turn away from these worthless things – this spoken in the very shadow of the temple of Zeus and in the presence of the priests of Zeus who only moments ago wanted to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. Even so, the Apostles barely prevented the crowd from going ahead with their sacrifices.

Both of these accounts of healing of persons born lame in Acts result in scandals. In both cases it was because the religious leaders could not accept that human beings could act with the power of God – Peter in Jerusalem; Paul in Lystra. Nor were they willing to accept that both were acting in the name of and with the power of Jesus – someone whom they thought that they had gotten rid of.

The world around us still has trouble accepting that God acts in and through the church to bring healing and reconciliation to the world.

The religious authorities in Jerusalem could not accept that that YHWH, creator of heaven and earth and the sea would work through Jesus whom they had resisted at every turn.

The priests of Zeus in Lystra could not believe that Paul and Barnabas were mere mortals and not gods in disguise.

We cannot control God’s healing power – despite the insistence of people like Oral Roberts or Benny Hinn.

But neither are we powerless! The church – through the ages – has tried to be faithful to the command to heal the sick and care for the suffering. As a Matthew 25 congregation we are committed to offering hospitality in keeping with the Church’s historic commitment to caring for others that changed the word “hospitality” into “hospital.” Virtually every city in America has at least one Presbyterian or Methodist or Baptist Hospital.

* Matthew 25 also reminds us that we are called to a life of compassion shown in visiting the sick and the imprisoned.
* This congregation developed a program of transportation to medical care as well as immigration check-ins.
* This congregation – through the efforts of the Sanctuary House Church and others! – has helped Marisol and her daughter, Liliany, receive healing care through a number of local agencies.

When we read accounts such as Paul’s healing of the lame man in Lystra, we long to do more – to heal all of the sickness and brokenness in our world. But as our Gospel lesson today reminds us, the way we welcome others, the way we offer even a cup of cold water – shows that we are followers of Jesus. And just as Jesus worked through the lives of Peter and John and of Paul and Barnabas, so Jesus works through the life of this congregation to bring healing to the world and blessing to all its inhabitants. May it always be so.