

Introduction - I'm Only Human

“Hey, I’m only human.” Have you ever heard that phrase? Have you ever used that phrase? This phrase came to mind when I read this week’s passage in Acts 14. I looked it up this week to get an idea of exactly what it meant. It is a phrase, “used for saying someone has been weak in the ways that most people are weak and should not be blamed for their behavior.” When you look up the phrase, the first thing that comes up is a popular song from 2017 called, “Human” by a British singer-songwriter named Rag’N’Bone Man. I’ve heard this song in commercials and on the radio, but never really dug into it. It’s really catchy, but it’s deeper than just a catchy song.

The chorus is, “I’m only human after all, I’m only human after all. Don’t put the blame on me, don’t put the blame on me.” I was reading online that it’s about the angst of the human condition and the inability for humans to be perfect and to solve the world’s more important problems. In the song are themes of human weakness, guilt, failures...apparently Rag’N’Bone Boy would be a good prayer of corporate confession writer. So I’m looking at the lyrics of this song, and I notice a line I’d never noticed before. The bridge of the song says this: “Cause I’m no prophet or Messiah, You should go looking somewhere higher.” Now, anytime the word Messiah is used in pop culture, I’m going to be interested. I stumbled upon this song when I was looking up the meaning of the phrase “I’m only human” and as I read the lyrics of the song, I realized the song’s bridge summarizes what Paul is saying in Acts 14. But Paul uses the phrase differently than we use it. I’m only

human is an excuse when we're not perfect. Paul uses it as a way to point to a perfect Creator. Yes, none of us are perfect. Yes, we are only human. But humans are created in the image of God. Our humanity can be more than an excuse for being imperfect.

What if being human is a gift from God? What if being "only human" is enough for God? In a fallen world where we will not be and cannot be perfect, what does it mean to be a human created in the image of God? What would happen if we defined our humanness more by the image of God and less by imperfection? I don't know the answer to these questions, because, well, I'm only human. But they're important questions to ask.

These are the questions we are invited to grapple with as we hear the story of Acts 14.

Saul, Paul, and Antioch Church

But before we get there, the story of Paul and Barnabas on their mission in Acts 14 starts in earlier in Acts. First, Paul was not always called Paul. First, he was Saul of Tarsus, who was a persecutor of the early church, called "The Way" in Acts. On his way to Demascus, Saul was suddenly knocked down and blinded by a great light. At that moment, a voice spoke to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." So Saul is sent to Demascus in order to arrest Christians,

and he enters the city preaching the Good News that Jesus is the Son of God.

And after Saul becomes a Christian Acts 13:1-3 says this, “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”

Antioch was a Greek city in modern-day Turkey, and there was this church there that was filled with all sorts of people. There are three people listed who, by the day's standards, would be unexpected leaders in the early church. Remember last week, that it was still unclear what it meant for Gentiles to be a part of the church? This week we see that it also would have been awkward to know how some Jews would have been treated, even though the bulk of the church was Jewish. You have Simeon who was called Niger, which means ‘black’ in Latin. Some scholars believe this nickname could mean that Simeon is of African descent, but we don't know for sure. Then there is “Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler,” Herod is a bad guy, a horrible ruler, and this Manaen worked for him. Then you have Saul, this persecutor of Christians, who is now a leader in the church. Looking from the outside in, and not having the background information that we all have, this church staff looks different. This unexpected group of church leaders worship God

and fast, and the Holy Spirit tells them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for a mission. So after fasting and praying, they lay their hands on the two and send them off. Their mission would be to bring the Good News to Gentiles all across the known world.

Before we continue, we should pause and reflect on this Antioch Church. Remember that church is the gathering of people, not the building. I think we all have an assumption of what church, the gathering of people, is supposed to sound like, be like, look like, smell like, and all that. Acts 13 shows us that none of that matters. What matters is worship and following the Holy Spirit. When there is true worship and Holy Spirit following, no matter what a church looks, no matter how the gathering is composed, God can do mighty things through it. First Presbyterian can be a church like that.

Acts 14

So Barnabas and Saul are set apart for this special mission to the Gentiles, and our reading from Acts 14 shows us what that looks like. It's a unique mission.

By this time, Saul is now called Paul. Paul and Barnabas arrive at a Greek city in modern-day Turkey called Lystra. They see a man who could not use his feet and had never walked in his life. Now, we've seen Jesus do this kind of stuff, but the people of Lystra have never seen it. And they've definitely not seen someone who wasn't the Son of God do it. And yet it happens. Paul can see the faith of the man, and says to him, "Stand upright on your feet."

The paralyzed man springs to his feet, he is healed. And then, chaos ensues.

The people of Lystra begin shouting that the gods have come down in human form. They've never seen anything like this. It's human nature to think that when something that happens that is outside of our ability to understand, that we have to somehow fit it into our little boxes of understanding. The little boxes of understanding for the folks of Lystra was the Greek gods - they thought Paul and Barnabas were incarnations of Greek gods. And it wasn't even that vague, they thought Barnabas was the powerful Zeus and Paul was Hermes, the messenger of the gods. So, seeing something that did not fit into the logic of the place and time, they act out of their little boxes of understanding. If the gods are visiting us in human form, we need to sacrifice animals to them!

So people start bringing oxen from outside the city to Paul and Barnabas and they're about to start slaughtering the animals to Paul and Barnabas! Paul objects, and says, "Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news." Paul says, I'm only human! And I bring the Good News. This is the 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. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; 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.”

This is a different message than we heard from Peter about the Good News last week. Peter focused on Jesus because the people listening, even though they were Gentiles, had heard of Jesus. But in Lystra, Jesus wasn't known, so Paul has to start on a larger scale. When we share the Good News, we need to know our context. How does God want us to share the Gospel in Quincy, on the South Shore, in our neighborhood, in our homes. It might look different.

Paul starts big. Turn away from all this meaningless stuff, and turn to the *Living* God, who created everything. This God is so good that even before you knew who the one true God was, even while you were worshiping a pantheon of false gods, the one true God gave you rain and fruitful harvests. God cared for you, gave you food and joy. Paul is saying, look, I'm not a god, but *the Living God* has sent me. You do not know this God specifically or personally yet, but you know...you know because you've received rain, and the rain has brought harvest, and the harvest has brought food, and the food has brought joy. That, Paul tells them, all comes from the Living God.

After we saw Peter preach last week, the Holy Spirit fell upon the people and many converted and were baptized. In Lystra, Paul didn't have the same outcome. Instead of conversion and baptism, this happened: “Even with these words, Paul and Barnabas scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to

them.” People’s reactions to us sharing the Gospel will be different. Their reactions are not markers of failure or success, it is only the work of God that causes conversion. Paul’s sermon was no worse than Peter’s, it’s just that the Holy Spirit decided to work in different ways for the people of Lystra than the people of Caesarea.

For Us

We can learn so much from this story. We’ve learned that the Holy Spirit can do mighty things through a worshiping church - no matter how qualified the people appear to be. We’ve learned that we have to know our contexts in order to faithfully tell others the Good News. We’ve learned that we also need to be prepared that not everyone will respond to the Gospel in the same way, some will be converted on the spot, others will still try to sacrifice oxen to you!

But I think the central lesson from this story comes from Paul’s words in verse 15. “We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news.”

We are mortals just like you. We’re only human after all. “Cause I’m no prophet or Messiah, You should go looking somewhere higher.” Paul is expressing here what we all know and feel. We as humans are weak, we fail, we are fragile and finite. We are needy and dependent. We want to be good and perfect and holy and we stumble. We sin. We fall short of the glory of God. From dust we came and to dust we shall return. We are mortals just like you.

We're only human after all. This is an important reality to embrace. It's humbling to admit you are mortal and imperfect, but humility is an important virtue in following Jesus. We start there. We are mortals just like you.

We are mortals just like you, *and* we bring you good news. What an important conjunction! We are mortals just like you, and we are set apart by God to bring you the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are mortals just like you, and God has entrusted us with the most precious message in human history. We are mortals just like you, and we are filled with the Holy Spirit to speak truth to a world thirsty for it. We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news.

It does not matter where you have been, what you have done, or your qualifications, God can use you to spread the Good News that Jesus offers forgiveness, peace, justice, and eternal life. You are only human, and yet the Holy Spirit can fill you and inspire you to introduce others to the Holy Spirit. You are mortal, but you have been entrusted with the gift and message of eternal life. You. Imperfect. Fallen. Sinful. Set apart. Entrusted. Worthy. All because God created you in God's image, God loves you more than you'll ever understand, and because through Jesus Christ you have been offered the gift of the everpresent Holy Spirit. Never forget that you are mortal. Humility is key in preaching the Good News. But also never forget that you are a beloved image-bearer whom God has set apart to speak and live the Gospel of love, peace, and justice.

Conclusion

I'm only human after all, I'm only human after all. Don't put the blame on me. Those lyrics point out that we use our humanness as an excuse for not being perfect. And while we will never be perfect in this life, we are loved by a perfect God. We are equipped by a perfect God. We are guided by a perfect God. Remember the reflection questions I started with: What if being human is a gift from God? What if being "only human" is enough for God?

I think the truth goes further than that. Too often we think our goal is to transcend being human, to be something beyond a fallen human being. But God created you, loves you, and redeems you. I think our jobs, as humans and as Christians, is to live fully into our humanness. To be fully human, bearing the image of God to those who see us, and humbly and imperfectly sharing the Good News. To say we are mortals just like you, *and* we bring you good news.