

+ Acts 13:38-49 + How Do You Save the World? + 2nd Sunday after Epiphany + 19 January 2014 +

Imagine for a moment that our world has come under attack not by an invading alien force, but a pandemic—a deadly virus that threatens the lives of countless people. Against everything that modern medicine can throw at it, the disease seems unstoppable. The world's finest doctors and scientists race against time to discover a cure to stop the pandemic from wiping out much of the world's population. News reports blare with warnings about the disease and what's happening around the world because of the disease. Such a pandemic causes chaos and fills people with terror because of the looming reality of death.

Things look pretty bad for our world, and there doesn't seem to be any solution in sight. Like countless others, you discover that you're starting to show symptoms of the virus. You're pretty scared and wonder how long the virus will take to run its course, but you're also hungry.

So you dig out the old, familiar recipe for your Grandma's chicken noodle soup. Whenever you were sick growing up, there was always a steaming bowl of that savory chicken noodle soup coming your way. It always made you feel a little better. Realizing how sick you are, you figure that a bowl of chicken noodle soup can at least be comfort food. So you cook it up just like Grandma used to make it. It smells wonderful. You ladle out enough of that yummy soup to fill a big bowl. You dig in and finish the whole bowl, but something strange happens. You actually start feeling better and your symptoms improve. With a little more soup, they completely disappear.

Could something as simple as Grandma's chicken noodle soup really be the cure for this complex, unstoppable disease? You give some of the soup to your family and what do you know? It works! You take some soup to your close friends and again, it works! You take some over to your next door neighbors and again, it works! It finally dawns on you what you really have. You have the cure to save the world. You want to share it with your other friends, with your other neighbors, with your co-workers, with your classmates, with people at the gym, at the store, everyone! Who knew Grandma was such a miracle worker!

The next day people start showing up at your house because they heard about this "miracle cure" and frankly they're getting desperate, but there's a problem. Your family doesn't want you to have anything to do with those people, those strangers out there. "Do you really want to share this with the whole world? Do these people really deserve it? What if we need it more?" So they start telling the people outside your house that the soup doesn't work for everyone, that it doesn't cure this particular virus, that it's all gone and can't be replaced, that you were just making things up to make them feel better, and on and on. So how do you save the world?

Now that's just an imaginary situation, but when Paul and Barnabas came to the city of Pisidian Antioch in modern-day Turkey, they found themselves in a similar situation. There wasn't a deadly virus infecting people, but they did find a city infected with the pandemic of sin and unbelief. The cure wasn't Grandma's chicken noodle soup, but it was someone who seemed just as simple and ordinary—Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. They came as ordinary men to ordinary people with an extraordinary message.

It was the Sabbath. So Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogue to worship and hear the Word of God. Knowing they were preachers of God's Word, the synagogue leader invited Paul to preach. He got up and shared with them not a "do-it-yourself" recipe for the pandemic of sin and unbelief, but instead he shared with them God's simple cure for their complex sinfulness—the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world.

The cure seemed almost too good, too easy to be true. At the end of his sermon, Paul simply told them, ***"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses."*** Through Jesus, they would be cured. They would be forgiven. They would be justified—declared free from guilt because Jesus took all that guilt on himself. Through faith in Jesus, that cure, that "justification" would be theirs.

Paul desperately wanted his countrymen and his fellow Old Testament believers to have this cure from the deadly pandemic of sin and unbelief. He did warn them that they shouldn't reject this cure, because there would be no others out there. ***"Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'"*** So what happened?

The Lamb of God worked through the preaching of his Word. Paul and Barnabas shared that cure of the Lamb with their Jewish hearers and it worked! They shared that cure with those who had converted to Judaism, and

again it worked! That cure worked so well that these healed believers invited Paul and Barnabas back to “feed” them next week. So they came back, but this time nearly the whole city was there!

You see, word had spread of Paul and Barnabas’ “miracle cure” among the Jews and the **“devout converts to Judaism”** and everyone else in Pisidian Antioch. So there they were. **“Almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.”** They were all there for this amazing cure to the terminal disease of their sin and unbelief, but there was a problem.

Seeing the crowds, the Jews became jealous of Paul and Barnabas. They really didn’t want this new cure of Jesus Christ being spread all over the place. They wanted to exclusively enjoy it for themselves. So they started to talk **“abusively against what Paul was saying.”** “He’s just a foreigner and out of his mind. Forgiveness can’t be that free. You have to do something besides that. You have to prove that you’re worthy of God’s cure for your sins. That cure probably doesn’t even apply to your problem anyway.” They attacked Paul verbally. They criticized and denied what he said. They tried to sabotage the cure to keep it exclusively for themselves.

So what did Paul and Barnabas do? Did they give up? No, they boldly shared the only cure for sin-sick souls—Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Those who had rejected the cure would be rejected by the holy God. **“We had to speak the word of God to you first,”** Paul told them. **“Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”** Of course, the sin-sick crowds were excited **“and they honored the word of the Lord...”** Many believed and personally enjoyed God’s “miracle cure”, as **“the word of the Lord spread through the whole region.”**

Our world really hasn’t changed, has it? It’s sick. It’s dying. It’s terrifying. It’s sinful and unbelieving. So how do you save the world? You can’t save the world with mighty deeds of power or force. You can’t be some spiritual Superman, but even as an ordinary Christian, you have something extraordinary. You have the simple cure for the complex problem of sin.

What makes the problem really complex is your own sinfulness. You know how terminally infected your own heart is with sin. You know how sin has infected every aspect of your life and the lives of those around you. You know that because God is holy, you deserve to be rejected and left for dead. You know that everyone else deserves the same.

Yet you also know the cure. You know that the Lamb of God came to take away your sins too—the big ones that dominate your memory and impact your life in a very real, public way, and the small ones that make daily life difficult, the public sins and even the secret sins that you don’t want anyone to know about. All of these have been forgiven, paid for, washed away in the blood of the Lamb of God. That simple cure from such an unlikely place has cured you of the guilt of your sins and from unbelief. Even when you were dead in sin, the cure of the Lamb gave you new life through faith in him.

If that cure of the Lamb of God has so healed you, wouldn’t you want to share that cure with your spiritually dying loved ones and friends? Yes, some may reject that cure because they prefer a “do-it-yourself” remedy that only ends in death and destruction, but Christ’s cure works. His cure works on the sin-sick souls of family members and friends, of co-workers and classmates and neighbors, of young and old, of male and female, of educated and uneducated, of wealthy and poor.

...But what about that person you don’t like so much or that family that makes you uncomfortable or that group of people who are so different from you? Perhaps when it comes to sharing that cure of Jesus, you find yourself getting jealous like the Jews in Paul’s day and you start making excuses about not sharing Jesus’ cure or you even downplay how effective that cure really is. Perhaps you’ve grown comfortable with being in such a nice, small, family-like church setting that you don’t want to disrupt that or lose that. So you hesitate. You make excuses. You dismiss Christ’s effective cure...and souls keep dying, even loved ones and people you know.

So how do you save the world then? Honestly, you can’t. Paul and Barnabas couldn’t either, but Jesus can. Jesus did, and Jesus will. That Lamb of God came to take away your sins and replace your unbelief with trust in him. Yet he also came for the lowly and the different and the unique and the lost. He came to heal and raise the dying, even you and me. In the end, it doesn’t matter where you came from or what your social status is or what you look like or who your daddy is, this cure from Jesus himself is the only cure for the guilt and unbelief in your heart and in the hearts of every other soul in this world. They’re dying and you have the cure. You have

Jesus. You have the precious, cleansing, healing blood of the Lamb of God. So take that cure and share that cure. Then watch as Jesus saves the world one soul at a time. Amen.