

***"46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: 'We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47 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.'"***

***48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. 49 The word of the Lord spread through the whole region."***

On this celebration of Epiphany, the day where we celebrate Jesus Christ coming not just to save the Jews, but for all of the Gentiles too, there's a term that I would like for us to explore: Baggage. We're not talking about the \$60 carry-on from Spirit airlines or the precious gifts brought by the wise men. It's a word that speaks about the experiences, ideas, and thoughts that have happened or are currently happening to a person who goes along with them. Similar to a carry-on that has your passport, toothbrush, and phone charger, it's coming along wherever that person goes. And in the same way that it causes difficulties in climbing a crowded escalator, baggage can cause some genuine hardships and hurdles in interpersonal relationships and also in regards to faith.

Let me explain what I mean by going through the background to our text. Paul and Barnabas had started their first missionary journey. They had set sail to spread the word about Jesus to others. They knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that he was that perfect and eternal sacrifice that gave eternal life in heaven. And they just couldn't keep that message to themselves, so they got on a boat to go and tell others about it.

And eventually, they come to a city called Antioch, which is where this story takes place. Paul and Barnabas had come to the synagogue and had told the good news about Jesus to the Jewish believers. And as God's Word is powerful, they wanted to hear more and invited them to come back and tell them more next week. But the word brought more than just the Jews; almost the whole city had come to hear the fantastic Gospel message.

And how did the Jews react? They were jealous. They were upset. They rejected the message that they had so eagerly embraced before. And the only reason that they had a change of heart? It was because God was working among some people they didn't entirely like.

Those Jewish believers in Antioch were dealing with some pretty heavy baggage. They were looking around at all the people who weren't like them, all the people who might have even been their enemies coming to hear how God came to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, and they were jealous that others had what they did. What do you mean that the Gentiles are saved too? You're talking about those people. Do you mean the Egyptians who enslaved us for 400 years? Do you mean the Babylonians who destroyed our city? You mean the Greeks, who one time outlawed the ability to worship. Do you mean the sinful and immoral people who live around us in this city who don't care about living the right and holy way? You're telling me that Jesus died for them? I'm just not cool with that. Not these people.

What caused the break was the proclamation of the universality of God's grace in Jesus's, the door opening complete and wide to all the Gentiles. This stirred the Jewish exclusiveness and particularism to violent opposition when so many Gentiles now came. Their baggage was heavy. And rather than share in the grace of God with others, they left it behind. How silly.

So do you have any baggage? I mean, are there some people who you would rather avoid than share the message of the salvation of Christ with? I would assume and hope that not of you would cease to be Christian because we started outreach to a particular ethnic group, but are there people that you would rather avoid, even types of people that you would instead tell off than tell the Gospel to.

Maybe it's a famous politician on the other side than you are, and whatever their views are, they always seem to be the exact opposite of what yours are. Perhaps it's that insanely wealthy person who has never had to work a day in their life, and they are just so out of touch. Maybe it's that person who at some point in your past hurt you deeply and never really even seemed to care to apologize to you. The people who are changing things around you in ways you don't like. The one who is immoral and awful. The one who is loud and insensitive.

We've probably all got someone who, if we saw them in the pew next to us, we would be more upset than if they never came near you again. I mean, why would I ever share the pew? Why would I invite them to church? After all of the things they have done with all of the ways that they think about things. That person or those people threaten my way of life, ideals, and life. No way.

How silly. It truly is ridiculous. I know it doesn't seem that way when those bags seem so heavy. When it appears that there is a chasm that can't be crossed, but those bags are so comically light, the space so dismally short between us, when you look at the way Jesus handled things. With each of us.

Before the time that we came to faith, on our first day of life, we were not just theoretically against God. We were not just annoying or inconsiderate. We were actual committed enemies to Jesus and anything he had to offer. We came out of the womb metaphorically cursing God, swinging our fists, desperately trying to get close enough just to spit in his face. You were a spiritual enemy of God, you hated him, and it was no secret or feeling. You absolutely despised him. And what did God do? Jesus looked down from heaven at that snarling soul and said: I love you. Jesus looked at that enemy we were and told us I died for you. Jesus looked and saw a stinking and dirty human and said I want you to be with me forever.

Jesus has never been too concerned with the baggage of this world. Jesus didn't really care about the fact that the Romans were ruling over Israel by force; he was more concerned with healing the Centurion's son. Jesus didn't really care that the Jews didn't associate with Samaritans; he was more concerned with giving her the living water that leads to eternal life. He doesn't care as much about the differences between people, whether you're a Jew, or a Magi from the east, or a queen from Sheba, or gentile from Antioch, he is a light to the sinful world and wants all people to be saved.

That's what the message of Epiphany and of Acts 13 is about. The Gentiles were so overjoyed to hear that they had a Savior in Jesus who cared about them and died for their sins. The good news of the Gospel coming from a Jewish visitor changed their hearts and brought them to faith. The message of Jesus Christ crucified has the power to overcome all differences and all baggage that this world could bring.

So dear Christian sisters and brothers. I know that there is still baggage that we all have. There are still people because of who they are, what they have said, or things that they have done that make them disagreeable to you. There is someone that you can think of that you would rather see ruined than in a pew. But I have a challenge for you, one in the spirit of Epiphany. The next time you see that person on the news, or hear their voice in the workplace, or remember what they did to you, I want you to in that moment of negativity, to pause. To think. To remember what Jesus did for you personally. And to say to yourself: "Jesus died for them too ." Amen.