

Sweet Dreams Are Made Of This...

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Read Acts 14:1-7



There's a shop near here that sells cakes. They're the nicest, sweetest, most delicious cakes that the world has ever seen. Anybody who walks near the shop is immediately transported to delightful places just by the smells that spill out of the door. They say that the smell inside is so lovely that you can taste it.

Every type of cake is available within its hallowed walls; the window displays are an ever-changing cornucopia of swirls, sprinkles and sponge. Everything within is divine, from the humblest cupcake to the mightiest gâteau.

There is one problem, though. Only people with the surname Jones can actually buy anything from the shop. Everyone is welcome to approach, but only the Joneses can enter. Only the Joneses can buy. And only the Joneses can eat the cake - there are strict rules governing this.

Those who marry into the Jones family, once they have signed the register and adopted the name, are welcome. But those who marry beyond the family are barred forever; as soon as the ink dries on their new signature the doors are forever closed to them.

For any Miss Jones, this seems deeply unfair; why should their fathers, brothers and uncles keep the privilege of such delicious sweet treats once married? The men don't mind; that is unless they don't possess a sweet tooth (diabetes is strangely absent from the Jones genetic makeup).

It's not as if the shop sells cheap cakes though. There's an eye-watering price tag attached to each cake. But those who hear the Joneses talk of the joy of biting into the confectionary delight would probably pay twice as much just to get a nibble.

But something dramatic has happened.

A new family have taken over the bakery and they've thrown the doors open to everyone. All and sundry are now welcome to indulge in the cakes that have been the sole preserve of the Joneses for generations. And they've brought the prices down. No longer will those who wish to try one of these wonders have to worry about the contents of their bank account; there's now a "pay as you are able" policy in place.

Though this has gone down well with the wider public (and dentists and bank managers), the Jones family are furious. They're threatening to take the new owners to court; they want them drummed out of town. What is good news for the wider (and getting ever wider) population is offensive to those whose noses have been put out of joint. Of course, there's nothing to stop the Joneses still indulging in their favourite bun; it just doesn't taste as nice as when it was exclusively theirs.

Some of the Joneses have a cunning plan; they've started a rumour that the new owners have brought in different ingredients. Whispers are being heard that the sugar is no longer fair trade. The local Facebook group is awash with conspiracy theories, as some of the Joneses have started posting scare stories from America about the dangers of a diet rich in icing.

There is a real risk that the new owners will up and leave and where that will leave the rest of us who have started to enjoy our newly found indulgences, we just don't know...

Placing this story (and we will hear more about the Joneses next week) alongside our reading, we might see why the Jewish people were annoyed with Paul and Barnabas. What was for them a story unique to their people had become an international bestseller. What was for them a dream of hope as yet unfulfilled was shown to be a real and living truth, borne out in word and action.

Paul and Barnabas, by speaking in a synagogue, would have found a ready and attentive audience. An audience, however, that would not have been impressed as the message spread across the town, spilling out into Gentile ears. Gentile ears, moreover, that took these words to heart and started making commitments to "their" Messiah.

So, it's not surprising that some of the Jews took umbrage and decided to take action. Their first course of action was one of the most insidious still effective today: gossip. Nothing can destroy someone like the quiet voice of discouragement, the softly distorted truth, or outright lie, that spreads like wildfire, indiscriminately destroying all in its path.

We see the destructive way that words can cause harm and hurt; for Paul and Barnabas it even turned a number of Gentiles against them. Having a common enemy to aim at brought an alliance between Jew and Gentile that otherwise would have been inconceivable. Whereas Paul and Barnabas preached a gospel of unity under the cross of Christ, these people were united against that very message.

Rather than risk a trial by stone, Paul and Barnabas remove themselves from the area, leaving the gospel to take root (or not), just as Jesus had predicted in the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:1-15).^[1] And who would blame them, particularly as they had received the same treatment at their stop-over in Pisidian Antioch only a few days earlier (Acts 13:49-50).

But what do we distil from this for us to be reflecting on?

Should we side with Paul and Barnabas, acknowledging the injustice meted out to them by the very people who should be embracing the fulfilment of the promises in what we call the Old Testament? Should we recognise the pain of separation, when we have to step away from something we've invested our lives in just because some people are trying to undermine our hard work? Do we know something of the emotional pain that Paul and Barnabas must have been feeling even as they escaped the physical punishment that would have been awaiting them had they stuck around?

Or is there something more arresting for us as we reflect on those Jews who turned on the Good News. Maybe there is something for us to learn from the Jews who first welcomed Paul and Barnabas into the Synagogue before turfing them out later when it got the message became a bit difficult to cope with.

A phrase that I heard some years ago at an Open Doors event in response to the nature of persecution in the Western Church is a continuing cry of anguish: "We do it to ourselves." Persecution in English churches is not from the government, or from antagonistic authorities that want to permanently shut churches or keep Christianity out of the public square^[2] no matter what we might want to believe. Persecution in English churches is kept within the walls and structures of those very churches; whether it's in seditious gossip or undermining of each other's practices or theology.

Just like those opponents of Paul and Barnabas who should have been absolutely on their side, we find the Christian church divided over issues such as who is in or out, not realising that it's not up to us to decide this: that's God's job. We see division over who should be in charge: that's God's job. We see division over who should be allowed at the communion table: that's God's job. We see division over so much that has nothing to do with us.

Our task is to declare the life and death of Jesus in word and action; the rest is up to God. And it's called "Good News" for a reason...

Amen.

^[1] Iconium features a couple more times in Acts, which is worth noting in light of the Parable. Later in the chapter, we read that some of Paul and Barnabas's antagonists follow them to stir up trouble in the neighbouring city of Lystra (Acts 14:19). But then, a few chapters later, we read of Christians from Iconium giving Timothy a glowing reference when he joins Paul for his later travels (Acts 16:1-2). Some you win, some you lose...

^[2] The synagogue where Paul and Barnabas declared the Good News was more than just a gathering place for worship; it was a market place, a meeting place, a place where the whole community could come together and share in the whole of life.

