

[Easter 4 Thess 2020]

EASTER 4
MAY 2, 2020

1ST LUTHERAN
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Acts 17:1-9, MK 13:9-11
Turning the World Upside Down

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

They're turning the world upside down!!!

That's the accusation made by the city authorities against the Apostle Paul and his ministry partner, Silas. Think the mayor, city council members, chamber of commerce – people who have a vested interest in keeping their town communally safe, culturally sound, and economically secure.

Their target? Well, let's take a look at what we know about this infamous apostle named Saul (Hebrew) or Paul (Greek):

1. He was born a Jew and excelled in his religious education: so much so that he became a sort of theological **hit man**, a zealot of the Jewish faith and avid persecutor of Christians... The bible tells us that he was present at the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. AND
2. he was a Roman citizen which gave him freedom to travel the Empire.
3. One day, on a trip to Damascus to arrest some pesky Christians, he has an encounter with Christ that changes his life: a bright flash of light knocks him to the ground, and a thundering voice cries out, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"
4. From that moment on, Paul starts becoming the most famous proclaimer of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world!!
5. He's responsible for the earliest letters of the church (~ ¼ of the whole N.T.!).
6. And he's a principle player in the first **rift** or **division** in the church – (***I know!!! Can you imagine church members ever being divided over differences of opinion?***)

I'm sure you've heard the joke about the rescue of a man on a deserted island. He'd been alone there for years, yet when it was time to go, he pointed at one of two structures he'd built and asked his rescuers to wait while he went and locked up ***the church***.

One man asked: *Well, what's that other building over there?* The man replies with a disgusted snort, ***That's the church I used to belong to!***

7. Paul's switch from Jew to Christian is absolute and complete – he *gets it* about the meat of the Gospel, the foundation of the faith, the heart of the Good News of what Jesus tried to convey to the disciples:

That there is no distinction – male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free, able-bodied or challenged, tall or short, skinny or plump...

...red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight...

we all belong to the family of humanity, and as such we are all created in the image of God, and as such all belong to the family of God...

8. The PROBLEM is that many people don't *know* that they are loved by God, accepted by God, welcomed by God, belong to God...because the church has spent way too much time, energy, money, brain power, passion and spiritual capital fighting over who's in and who's out, who belongs and who doesn't, whom St. Peter should welcome into the halls of heaven and whom he should banish to the depths of hell...
9. So, on the road to Damascus, Jesus changes Paul from persecutor of the church to prince of the church. And once his vision is restored (physically and spiritually) Paul, dedicates his life, his ministry, his whole being to proclaiming the good news of God's love for all people through Jesus Christ. That's it, that's his calling, that's his love: welcoming everyone into the family of God, especially those people who, until that point, had been officially *excluded* because they weren't part of the original club!!

Yet for some reason, what is absolutely *clear as crystal* to Paul is absolutely *clear as mud* for the original disciples of Jesus. Ironic, isn't it? Reading through the Gospel stories of Jesus' life and ministry, we're able to see how – time and again – the Lord challenges the restrictive practices of the day:

- no touching people who are sick
- no eating with "sinners" – or even visiting with them;
- no welcoming tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners, Roman soldiers, etc.

Jesus ignores those rules and welcomes them all – delights, even, in welcoming those most abhorred by the religious purists of the day. Pretty clear, right?

Well, when Jesus ascends into heaven, and the disciples begin their initial evangelical outreach to the world...they only get part of the invitation equation right: they encourage people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (which *is* what God wanted!) – but they also require them to live a kosher life (which is *not* what God wanted!).

Now, don't get me wrong – I'm confident that the disciples were doing the best they could – I mean, think about the massive shock they had to endure. Jesus is dead, then he's alive, then he pops in and out of their lives for 50 days, then he's gone – physically for good...

And...even though the promised Holy Spirit is guiding, inspiring, pushing, prodding, filling, comforting, helping, etc... still, it's not the same – not without Jesus there to keep the disciples out in front, out on the edge, out there looking for new ways to share the good news of God's love with all people...

That takes vision, that takes energy, that takes confidence, that takes spirit... and that requires an embrace of...CHANGE...defining a new normal...

You and I know what it's like to be forced to define a new normal. It takes a ton of energy just to face the uncharted days-and-weeks ahead – to say nothing of trying to figure out where and how we go into that unknown future – and to whom we devote our limited supplies of spiritual, physical and emotional resources.

I can easily see the original followers of Jesus just running out of steam...

I mean, when that happens, when our tank is empty, when we're just done...we regress, don't we? We simplify, we step back from what might be new and good, and return by default to what was good *once upon a time*...even if that existence wasn't perfect...

How does that saying go: *Better the devil you know than the devil you don't...*

Thanks be to God, however, that wasn't God's plan for this new Church of Jesus Christ. After five or so years of watching the Lord's original followers hunker down, play-it-safe, try-to-be-invisible...God decides to shake things up, to stir the pot, to modernize, reorganize, revolutionize...

And that's when...

*the Apostle Paul
is issued the call
to go over the wall
and minister to all...*

It's a calling that he embraces – with a passion!!!

As we see in today's bible passages, Paul's first step when arriving at a new town is to head to the synagogue – where very openly he shows the people how Jesus came not only to save the Jews – but everyone else as well. His message appeals not so much to some – but quite a bit to others – so much so that many people's lives are *changed*...their love for God through Jesus Christ begins to permeate every aspect of their lives...

This means that their habits are altered...their support of worldly systems are changed, and they re-focus how they spend their resources...

The consequences? The most notable to these communities is that people stop spending money on worship at all those temples to idols...

This was a big deal to those towns – you and I know how much a community depends on people supporting the local economy...

That's a priority for my family – and our family of faith here at First Lutheran – we buy locally because we need each other to survive and thrive.

Now in Thessalonika, as in most cities of the ancient Greek/Roman world, there were temples everywhere in their towns...featuring gods of every kind and stripe.

In fact, when Paul had walked through the ancient city of Athens, he saw idol after idol, and temple after temple, each of them dedicated to a specific aspect of life: one to help with business, another to bless a family, the list goes on and on. He even discovered one shrine dedicated to *an unknown god*...

Paul, of course, seizes on that inscription “*to an unknown god*...” and proclaims that he, personally, knows that god – the One and **Only real** God – *the God who made the world and everything in it* (17:24). And he knows the Son of that very special god – Jesus of Nazareth, the savior of the world.

And that's where the trouble starts...

For if that's true...if *this* God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...is real... then none of those other gods are real – including the Emperor of Rome – and there's absolutely nothing to be gained by people spending their money at all-or-any of those shrines/temples...**because the one true God accepts and loves them as they are, without any offerings!!!**

What happens next is completely understandable. The temple owners, who's income is produced by those places of worship, cry out that their businesses are being ruined by this

gospel of Jesus Christ. We're told that they drag Paul and Silas before the magistrates of the city and shout, "***These people (are) turning the world upside down!!***" (17:6).

"These people (are) turning the world upside down!!" (17:6).

I like that a lot – and, as you know by now – I'm not much of a radical. I'm not a change-addict. My favorite dessert flavor is *vanilla*. My wife would say that my favorite color is *beige*. And my favorite operating principle is to K.I.S.S. – as in *keep it simple...Stupid – or Scott!!*

Here's something to think about: Now, we know how *Paul and Silas* were turning **their** world upside down...setting people free from the need they felt to satisfy every god in order to prevent all tragedy and pain.

So, how do you suppose God is calling us to turn our world upside down???

It's pretty simple, really. I'm absolutely convinced that God is calling us to set people free from all those things that followers of the LAW like to hold up as requirements for a pure or mature faith. They like to warn us that we should be trying, praying, studying, worshiping, serving – more, better, purer, harder...whatever-er...

When, in fact, I believe that Jesus is calling us to relax, to have a seat, to take a moment with a friend – or stranger – and simply be with them – as Jesus was with so many people – as Jesus is with us.

I believe that the Lord's calling us to find delight in all of God's graces – especially those that appear in strange and surprising places.

I'm going to end with a story that shows what I mean.

Years ago our daughter, Rachel, spent her college summers as a counsellor at Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp in northwestern Montana. At the end of one summer, we flew down from Alaska, rented a car, and picked up Rachel at camp late on a Friday afternoon.

Since we were all tired, we decided to spend the night at a motel just 15 miles away in Kalispell. After supper, Carolyn went straight to bed – but Rachel and I walked to the bar across the parking lot to have a chat and a beer.

We quickly discovered that it was karaoke night at the bar – and many of the songs were typical country: lost love, lots of pain, and love of a dog...right?

Imagine our surprise when two girls started singing Amazing Grace...

We kind of smiled at each other...as did everyone else in the bar – the big guys playing pool laughed and rolled their eyes...

But then something strange started to happen – the laughter died down as a few people in the crowd started singing – and the more they sang, the more other people started to sing. Eventually, by the end of the song, those big pool-playing cowboys had their arms around each other, belting out the refrain like everyone else, knowing the words by heart:

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see...!

Thanks be to God. Amen.