On Turning the World Upside Down

ACTS 17:1-6 (NRSVUE) ***After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, 3explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead and saying, "This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you." 4Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. 5But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house. 6When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some brothers and sisters before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, 7and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus." 8The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, 9and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.***
The Word of God for the People of God:

I don't think there's a direct parallel between our situation today and the one Paul and Silas created in Thessalonica. Now, If Marcus and I were to go around Arkansas preaching against Penal Substitutionary Atonement, and word got around, yeah, there'd be some churches readyto tar and feather us!

It's notable that when the mob came for Paul and Silas, they slipped out of town and went over to Beroea. There their message was well received. We also know that later the church at Thessalonica became one of Paul's major supporters. His first epistle was written to that church. But the fundamentalists there said the Christians were turning the world upside down. Little did they know…

Sometimes when you turn the world upside down things get spilled and broken and people get in a dither. Sometimes what is restored or replaced after the world is turned upside down is better than before. And it's hard to know which it's going to be—when you turn somebody's world upside down.

As Luke shares this story, turning the world upside down is not just an emotional outburst against an inconvenient disruption. It's a serious charge. The Romans enforced civil order and understandably looked with disfavor on any who might disrupt it. The people of Thessalonica brought charges against one of their own, saying, ***"These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus."***

It's true that Christianity brought change in the lives of all who accepted it, and eventually it brought dramatic social change; but a major purpose of Luke's writing is to show that neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor Christianity in general make any claim to power over the Empire. The Jewish expectation of Messiah was precisely that: Messiah would raise an army and overthrow Rome. So, when Jesus is proclaimed Messiah, logic connects the dots, and part of Jewish opposition to

Christianity was their fear that Rome would bring force to put down what might be perceived as a rebellion. Luke is writing to mediate that fear.

Ironically, that's exactly what happened a couple of decades later. A group of Jewish Zealots stirred up a rebellion, hoping all of Israel would jump on the bandwagon and God would send angel armies to guarantee victory. After all, Jewish Scriptures were full of those kinds of stories.

But instead, in 70 CE, Titus, Roman General and son of Emperor Vespasian, destroyed Jerusalem, including Herod's Temple, and the Jews were dispersed across Europe and western Asia. It's called the "diaspora," and there was not another Jewish presence identified with Palestine until 1948.

Talk about the world being turned upside down! But it was not Christians who did that. In Thessalonica, Christians were wrongly criticized.

It might be well for us to ponder a bit whether the Christian faith today is even ***able*** to turn the world upside down. Critics see the church as socially irrelevant, and in too many specific cases they're right. But might our faith lead us in ways contrary to the decrees of the emperor—or governor—or school board.

Both Jesus and the early church preached about the kingdom of God. It was easily misunderstood as an anti-Roman political agenda that advocated disloyalty to Caesar and support of a rival emperor.

It was inaccurate; assumed from misinformation, some of which was intentional. We can relate to that. But where the true church of Jesus Christ is alive, it may not be as socially and politically irrelevant as many critics suppose.

Critics see the church in general, and us by assumed association, as judgmental, homophobic, misogynist, racist, filled with hate—all the things opposite of what Jesus taught and lived. Critics judge us, if they pay attention to us at all, as essentially useless, maybe even counterproductive to the good of society. That's the major image of church in North America.

The fact is: First Christian Church in Conway, Arkansas does not fit those categories. So, where ***do*** critics get their image? Or are we even noticed?

In multiple surveys and studies, one bad experience in one congregation is the number one reason people drop out of church. We're now two or three generations into the church "dropout" pandemic, so today entire generations have never experienced *any* church in depth, and yet are critical of church in general.

Yes, the church is imperfect. There are no perfect congregations. There are no perfect ministers. Yes, there are too many "bad experiences:" from being ignored by the minister to being sexually molested by the youth director to singing the wrong kind of music to disagreeing with a teaching that doesn't fit one's chosen

political philosophy. Some are leaving the church because it condemns LGBTQ+ relationships, while others have left because the minister married gay couples.

Yes, there have been far too many bad experiences, some of which caused lasting emotional, psychological, and even physical harm. And there's been too little accountability. But in the last 50 years the majority of North Americans have not participated regularly in church at all, and within that population most criticism originates, not because their world has been turned upside down by the church, but simply because of generalized stereotypes based on specific episodes.

I'm not sure there's an effective response to any of that; but there's another reality to consider. In Pine Bluff, a couple joined our church because their church—another congregation in the community—was fighting over some issue I long since forgot. They visited us for several weeks, and when they joined, they said, "This church is the best kept secret in town." In the community, the only thing most people knew about First Christian Church was its unique roof.

How can a church turn the world upside down if it's the best kept secret in town? How can we even make a difference when our average worship attendance is 34, our average Sunday School attendance is 16, and our budget is less than six figures? If that's the only way we see ourselves—too small, inadequately funded, too old *[Don't use us old folks as an excuse! We're in the middle of things! Besides, 45% of our active, participating adult members are under retirement age, and if you include our small youth group, it's exactly 50%.]* But what narrative do we tell ourselves; and how is that narrative reflected in our presence in the community?

What kind of presence does our building project to the people in our neighborhood or to the people driving up and down Donaghey Avenue? Is it still associated with the Senior Center?

The leaders of several local ministry and charity agencies are aware of us because of our budgeted financial support. But beyond those administrators, what kind of presence is projected by our community outreach? Does anybody else even know? Are we the best kept secret in town?

Does our presence and ministry project Jesus as Lord?

If we were to lock our doors and close down tomorrow, who would miss us? Would anybody's world be turned upside down?

On April 16 we discerned a need to *relaunch* our presence in this community. Our strategy is twofold:

1. We are developing strategies to *reconnect* with our community through consistent ministries that project God's love in direct, tangible ways to the people in our immediate neighborhood; ministries that enable and encourage their faith journey, as well as meeting some of their life needs.

2. We are developing strategies to *reimage*, both our self-image and the image we project in the community, and we have two objectives:
    a. We are exploring ways to *refresh* our facility inside and out:
        i. We need to refresh the outside appearance and signage in ways that project a message consistent with our identity and with the life needs of the people in our neighborhood.
        ii. We need to refresh the inside into a space more efficiently organized and conducive for worship, education, fellowship, neighborhood ministries, and storage.
    b. And our youth will Reboot our social media presence.

Yes, all of that will take money. Maybe lots of money. It will take careful planning and frugal stewardship; but we do have resources.

Will all that turn the world upside down? In far too many ways the world already is upside down. It is our hope and our commitment that God can work through us to set our little corner of the world back upright.

Pastoral Prayer

Creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, this morning we acknowledge and give thanks for the tremendous talent within our congregation. We are a body filled with capable leaders already doing great things. It's so easy to depend on their gifts that sometimes we lose sight of why we're so richly blessed in the first place. Forgive us when we yield to the temptation to put our lives on cruise control and just let somebody else take care of it; and yet, keep us aware of our own limitations: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Remind us to take care of our own needs so we can be available when others need our attention.

Remind us in this time of worship that you have called us to partner with You in the work of fulfilling your vision and purpose in creation. Grant us grace to see ourselves—to see each other—as the gifted children you've created us to be. Guide us as we make choices that determine how we live out our understanding of your vision for us.

Refresh your vision in us as we worship. Around your table, grant us a sense of joy and an experience of true community in the sharing of loaf and cup. Give us dreams that motivate us—that make us come alive because we see ourselves doing what you created us to do.

In moments of doubt and uncertainty that are sure to come, when our storms seem monumental and turbulent, remind us that in Christ we are larger than all of them. You promise to be with us always, and we believe your promises. Help us with our moments of unbelief.

And in moments of effectiveness and fulfillment, keep us aware that it is you who gives us the vision, and it is you who gives us the ability, the strength, and the endurance to finish the good work you always are beginning in *each* of us, and in our gathered identity as the body of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Invitation to the Table

There's a lot of social media conversation about living in the present. Don't live in the past; don't live in the future; the present is all we have. There's a level of validity in that; but I think it needs to be fleshed out a bit.

It's true that living a life of regret over past mistakes gets us nowhere; nor can we go back to some Camelot lost. But we can't erase the past. It happened. What we can do is learn from our past. In Alex Haley's "Roots," Kizzee is in love with Chicken George, but won't marry him because, "He ain't got no sense of where he's been, so he ain't got no sense of where he's going."

It's also true that we can't live in the future: always hoping to hit the lottery or find that perfect "someone" who'll make life wonderful. But the writer of Proverbs in the Hebrew Scriptures said, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Consider this: you rush up to the ticket counter at the airport and pant, "Quick! Give me a ticket!" How will the ticket agent respond? [Wait for response] See, you can't even get on an airplane without a plan—a vision for the future. The cliché says, "He who aims at nothing will hit his mark every time."

At this table we celebrate one who offers a hope that's anchored in what he did in the past and is sustained in God's promise for an eternal future in God's presence.

In his first epistle to the church in Corinth, Paul wrote: ***"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death [past] until he comes [future]." (11:26)***

I don't claim to know exactly what all that means or how that promise will be fulfilled or what it will be like. There are plenty of people out there who are convinced they know. In my faith I'm to the point of trusting God: leaving all that divine past & future stuff in God's hands, so I'm free to follow Jesus today.