

Turning the World Upside Down

sermon digest

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Acts 17:1-9

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It was no ordinary day. The question had been there when we arrived; and Dr. Paige Kelly, who had served as the church's interim, suggested the church wait until its new pastor was in place to make a decision. After careful study and listening to one another, the church made its decision and on a Sunday morning in early 1976, ordained Mazelle Allen as the church's first woman deacon. The first woman to serve as the vice president of a bank in Louisville, the first woman to serve in the city as a bank branch manager, the woman who had co-chaired the pastoral search committee that brought us to Buechel Park and faithfully filled almost every other leadership position in the church, the woman who would within a few short years be the first woman to serve as church's chair of deacons, Mazelle, a lovely, intelligent, gifted woman, was an obvious and excellent choice for the job. A few didn't think so. A couple of families left the church. (I recall the sense of glee we felt when one of them reported his dismay on attending the first business meeting in his new church only to discover that the main topic on the agenda was—you guessed it—the selection of women deacons). The decision, however, stood and eventually became commonplace as numerous women filled and continue to fill the office of deacon in that church.

I recall, and I'm sure you recall, similar experiences of dramatic change—change so startling and new that it signified the shaking of the foundations. I recall the turmoil Louisville underwent when the school busing order came down. Learning that we actually intended to send our children to school the next week, one man in the church wildly warned, "They'll be killed; they'll be killed!" And yet visiting Louisville a couple of weeks ago, I was amused and pleased to hear our friend Jean West speak with pleasure about the fact that her granddaughter would be bused to the school in downtown Louisville she herself had attended many years earlier. The change that so shook the community has become a part of daily life. The experience of neighborhood has over the years grown, and the sky has not fallen one single time.

I recall reading Dieter Hessel's *Social Ministry* for ethics colloquium in seminary. Hessel describes the stages of social change. The status quo is unsettled as some within a group or society begin agitating for change. The change, if it happens, brings with it a time of conflict and unrest, followed by efforts to consolidate the change into a new normalcy. Things settle down and the change is incorporated into a new status quo, which then slips into stagnation or into a new phase of agitation and a renewed cycle of change with respect to other issues.

Change may seem to us so uncomfortable, so painful that we would rather skip it altogether. I recall persons I loved and respected criticizing Martin Luther King for disturbing their sense of peace. Why couldn't he just leave things alone? I recall the sense of dismay my mother registered when I wrote a letter home after my first week in college, telling about Sam Oni joining the church I had attended and would soon join. She was not censorious or angry, but she couldn't help but wonder why he didn't just go join a church of his own kind. Why upset things and make people angry?

Women in places of leadership, integrated school rooms where black and white children learn side by side, black leadership reaching out into all areas of our society—changes that rocked us back on our heels only a few decades ago, changes that engendered a move toward fairness that still is not complete, but changes none of us in this room would want to undo. These changes have become a part of our everyday lives, unleashing gifts and potential among members of our churches and citizenry that have benefitted all of us. Thank God for the foresight and the courage of people willing to endure the pain and discomfort of getting from there to here!

Enter the Apostle Paul. I know, he is in the Bible; and we do tend to take anything in the Bible as being old hat, taking place in a bygone era unlike our own and having an outcome already in view, already, if you will, decided by God and completely lacking in drama. I recall upon having watched Ken Burns' documentary series on World War II, commenting to Ben Smith that as I watched the setbacks, the uncertain progress Burns depicted in the war's unfolding, I, for the first time in my life, considered the possibility that we really could have lost the war. Ben, who had served in the war and recalled all too well looking the possibility of defeat in the face every day, just shook his head in disbelief at my comment and smiled. And so, as we turn to the story of Paul at Thessalonica, try with everything within you to grapple with the real human emotions that were at play. Consider that the outcome of that conflict was not unlike the outcome of the conflicts and change with which we struggle today. Consider that the outcome, then as now, was uncertain. And taking it one step further, try to see our story, our conflicts and struggles, in the light of the conflicts and struggles of those early Christians.

An esteemed professor and friend from Southern Seminary described the entire book of the Acts of the Apostles as the story of the unhindered gospel. His point was not that the message of what God was doing in Christ sped throughout the first century world encountering no difficulties, but that it moved encountering obstacles on every hand and one by one overcame them with the help of often hard headed, previously clueless human beings, who were willing to take the risk. The chasms between slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female had been hollowed out through the centuries. They would not be bridged easily nor quickly. The level of discomfort was high, and change took place only through the anguished conversion of a few leaders and a handful of courageous people.

You are familiar with the story. In the middle chapters of Acts, Paul and Barnabas and then Paul and Silas begin

missionary journeys among the Gentiles. Although their efforts meet with considerable success, they meet bitter argument and foment frequent riots. Why, onlookers must have wondered, were they going to the trouble? Why couldn't they content themselves with merely working with their own kind? The disruption in the synagogues and in the streets provided ample fodder for critics.

Add to this, the disruption in the church. Although you would think that Simon Peter's experience at the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman centurion (Acts 10), and the Jerusalem council's eventually blessing that experience (Acts 11) would have settled the matter, it apparently had not. Midway through their journeys, Paul and Barnabas are called back to Jerusalem to explain themselves. Consensus is reached and the missionaries are sent on their way with one problem: Paul and Barnabas themselves seem to have come to a parting of the way. Although Acts' account of the issue seems to center the disagreement on whether John Mark will again be included in the effort, indications seem to point to a deeper issue: the matter of whether Gentiles can be fully included in the church's fellowship or more exactly, can sit at table with Jewish Christians if they have not first submitted to circumcision. The disagreement is so intense that Paul and Barnabas each chose another ministry partner and go their separate ways.

So there you have it. A widening rift is developing not only between the church and its Jewish ancestors of faith, but within the church itself. Add to this a disregard for rigid Roman definitions of class which locked persons into the social strata into which they were born. Healing a slave girl whose powers of divination had enriched her owners had serious social as well as economic considerations (Acts 19). Such thoughtlessness, after all, cut into people's livelihood. The religion pandered by these foreigners would likely also cut into the sale of idols, thus eliminating silversmiths' main source of income. No wonder they rioted!

These missionaries of the faith, whom we esteem so highly, posed, you see, a real threat. They were introducing into the church issues concerning slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female—matters with which almost two thousand years later we still wrestle. They were unsettling a tenuous relationship between Jews and Christians, a relationship that would morph into a tragedy that would haunt the centuries. Going from village to village, they were disturbing the peace wherever they went. "These people who have been turning the world upside down," a mob in the city of Thessalonica blasted, "have come here also" (17:6). With so much obviously at stake, who could blame them for being upset?

Does the story sound quaint to you? Does it speak merely of a time so long ago, so different from our time that it has little relevance? Or, viewing the story in light of our own discomfort with the shrill and unwelcome prominence of some religious groups on our own political scene these last several decades, does it sound like more of the same? Are we so weary of religion that insists upon its own way in the public square that we are ready to give up on a Christian faith that is ready to "turn the world upside down?" In an age of religious pluralism where we know the vital importance of respecting and giving appropriate space to other religious voices, are we not tempted to step back from the public square and simply busy ourselves with quietly doing good works and letting be what will be? Are we not also so respectful of the differences we have within our own fellowship on matters of public interest that we do not want to thrust our views on one another, making our own interpretation of things a litmus test for fellowship and Christian devotion?

"We will live in harmony with one another respecting the diversity of our Christian experience," we promise in our Grace Covenant, "with no expectation that we shall walk in lockstep or wear a theological uniform." Does that mean that we will live in neutrality, keeping our views to ourselves, and steering clear of all of the divisions and frustrations swirling in the world around us? That can be the case only on one condition—only if we do not take the rest of our Grace Covenant seriously, only if we ignore our understanding of ourselves as an unfinished people of faith on pilgrimage to learn and embody more fully our basic faith commitment to the God we know in Christ, and only if we ignore the host of promises we have made to "live in the world as servants of God," "working for peace and justice among all people," "advocating religious liberty through the separation of church and state," caring "for God's creation," and "joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God's children."

New Testament faith and the faith around which we gather as Grace Covenant Church bids us outside ourselves, outside the close knit, protective environment of this small body of believers. It bids us to take the risk of involving ourselves in what it means today to take up the cause of leveling the divisions which keep some of God's children from fully utilizing their God-given gifts and fulfilling their God-given calling. Whether the issue is a quality public education for all of God's children; simple, decent, affordable housing for every family upon the face of this earth; access to quality medical care for all; compassionate justice and immigration reform for the most vulnerable members of our society, each and every issue calls us not into lockstep with one another or into turning ourselves and our faith into the political pawn of any political party or politician. Each issue, every issue that concerns the well being of any of God's children calls us to give it our best, unceasing effort.

Some years ago, the denomination we were a part of was going through an internal political struggle. Some were so bothered by the noise that they chose to turn a deaf ear and focus solely upon their own local fellowship and ministry. Some were so bothered by the noise that they just wanted it to go away and scorned any who sought to

challenge it. Observing the situation, Ken Chafin, our fellow minister and friend in Louisville, commented, "Some people are more concerned by those who are willing to risk rocking the boat than they are by those who are trying to steal it."

Abandoning the struggle, seeking to protect our own peace of mind by not paying attention to the issues and seeking to involve ourselves in their honest and fair resolution amounts to leaving the future and welfare of our democracy in the hands of those who are the loudest and most ruthless. It means, frankly, abandoning the Christ who is "in the least of these," our brothers and sisters. It means forsaking our Christian duty. What a shame for us. What a loss for our sisters and brothers in need.