

- Pastor Keith Madsen
Sunday, 09/06/15
File #3

“People Who Turn the World Upside Down”

Acts 17:1-9

“These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.” Have you ever heard the Christian church described in those terms? “These people who have been turning the world upside down...” It was an appropriate description. Christ had said, “many that are first will be last, and the last first.” And indeed those who were most strongly attracted by the Church were those who were last in society: the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the poor. Many of these became leaders in the Church.

But even more, the way the Church turned the world upside down was evidenced by what happened to the Roman Empire. Soon after the book of Acts was written there was extensive persecution of Christians in the city of Rome and some other places in the Roman Empire. This persecution ebbed and flowed for over 200 years. I’m sure there were Christians who thought it would last until Christ’s coming. But the Church eventually turned their world upside down. The Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and within a short time Christianity was the official religion of the empire that had persecuted it.

The Church during this time really did turn their world upside-down. This was a world where when a baby was *born*, the father could decide to have him or her just thrown out onto the city garbage dump. This was often done with girl babies in Rome and Greece. It was a world where women were little more than property, and had no rights in divorce proceedings. The pious prayer of the Jewish male of the day was, “God, I thank thee that you didn’t make me a gentile, a slave or a woman.” In exact contrast to this prayer, the Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” We note in verse 4 of our passage that “the leading women” responded to Paul’s message, and that was true throughout the ancient world – the gospel caught hold among women because when it turned their world upside down, it gave them a new chance at life! And it was a world where poor people could be put in jail for long periods simply for not paying their debts in a timely manner. By these standards, ¾ of the population of our country today would be in jail!

All of these practices were changed as the Church became more influential and took a prominent role.

Today few people would refer to the Church in our country as “these people who have been turning the world upside down.” The Church in our society blends into our society more often than it changes it. We are far from the attitudes of those like Paul, Silas, and Jason, whose presence created an uproar in Thessalonika. Yet, there abides within the hearts of many of us a conviction that the world does need to be changed, to be “turned upside down” even.

But there is a lot of frustration with this idea of changing the world. A few years ago John Mayer wrote a song called *Waiting on the World to Change*. The lyrics include these words:

“Now we see everything is going wrong
With the world and those who lead it
We just feel like we don’t have the means
To rise above and beat it.”

Is that the feeling of the church today? Do we see a need to turn the world upside down, but do we just not feel we “have the means to rise above and beat it”?

The story is told of a small town where the local church building caught fire in the middle of the night. Everyone went to either help fight the fire or watch those who were. One man turned to his neighbor and said, “Well, I’ve never seen you at church before!” And his neighbor said, “The church has never been on fire before!” Well, the church *has* been on fire before – in the Early Church, the Holy Spirit was sent from heaven and the Church caught fire. But too often today, the fire is but a few flickering embers.

A few years ago Tony Campolo wrote a book in which he essentially said that it is secular interests who have “turned the world upside down” from what it ought to be. His book was *Who Switched the Price Tags?* He got the title from his own experience as a youth, when he and his best friend devised what they considered to be a brilliant plan to break into a local store. They did not break in to rob the store, but to change the price tags on everything. He writes, “We imagined what it would be like the next morning when people came into the store, and discovered that radios were selling for a quarter and bobby pins were priced at five dollars each.” What Campolo was saying in the book was that our whole world operates like someone has mischievously gone around switching price tags – making unimportant things look valuable, and the truly valuable things in life look cheap. Turning the world upside down means getting the price tags right again.

Our world is one that consistently values things over people, lust over love, expediency over integrity, and the pleasure of the few over the welfare of the many. Who is going to turn this world upside down and shake it up, so that everything will be back as God intended once again?

The Church can be “these people who have been turning the world upside down” once again. I know, that seems like a big job, and it certainly seems like “we don’t have the means/ To rise above and beat it.” But we do, if we go about it the right way.

We have the means if we start with...ourselves! Jesus said, “first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” First, make sure your own world has the right values on top, with the others falling below, and then you will see clearly to turn the world around you upside down. Start with the person in the mirror. What values do you have that are “upside down” right now?

If we start with ourselves, then we will also have the resources to help those around us turn their worlds around, not in a judgmental way, and not in an upsetting way, but in a way that will help them put first things first, and realize their potential before God. Cathy and I were very touched by the movie *The Soloist* with Robert Downey, Jr. and Jamie Foxx. It’s based on the true story of an African-American man who studied music at Julliard. But schizophrenia grabbed hold of him and he ended up out on the street, playing for other homeless people on a viola with only one string. Robert Downey Jr. played a journalist who discovered this man, and invested time and effort in him to try to get him off the street and using his talent for the general public once again. I wish I could say that the effort was entirely successful, but it was not. However, in a way it was, because this one man at least found someone on his side. With his world turned upside down and crushing him, he had one person who learned to care enough at least to help him try and turn it back over again. What would it do to the world we live in if everyone who was being crushed by the weight of the world – every addict, every person with a mental or emotional disability, every out-of-work struggler – had just one person helping them to turn their jumbled world back right-side up again? That’s what we who are part of the church which follows Jesus Christ should be doing – not just sitting around and watching struggling lives, and “waiting on the world to change.”

In that part of the wider Church known as The Community Church of Issaquah, we do offer opportunities to be part of helping change the world. Coming up we have the Mayors’ Month of Concern, where we help collect food for the Issaquah Food Bank. We just finished being part of the Tools4School Backpack collection, helping children of low income families start school with all the supplies they need for a good year at school. That’s important! Education is how children of low income families can find a chance to make their lives better when they become adults. Similarly, we are going to be part of the Haiti mission trip, with several of our members going, and our church having contributed generously to the building of the school we are working on in Haiti. By helping give children in Haiti educational opportunity, we help change the world, one child at a time. At least at this church, if you want a chance to be part of changing the world, the opportunities are there.

A church that is about turning the world upside down cannot be about waiting, or watching or observing. Our faith is not a “spectator sport.” It’s about helping God recreate God’s world. Theologian Harvey Cox wrote a book a number of years ago called *God’s Revolution and Man’s Responsibility*. In that book he made an intriguing comparison. He wrote, “A parachutist gets interested in training when he has to jump the next day. He’d better learn how the parachute operates if tomorrow he is going to bail out at 20,000 feet. For him, the training session in which he learns the lay of the land where he is going to come down, how to move his body, and how to pull the cord – such a session is not boring at all... On the other hand, we are bored by our training sessions *because we never jump*. We don’t jump into the place where we are needed for reconciliation, where we are needed to be poured out. Like the worst kind of soldiers, we hang around the barracks.”

Well, I’m not a military person, but I know that’s no way to fight a war. And it’s also no way to turn a world upside down. We have to take what we learn in this place, and take the Spirit, whose presence we sense in this place, and we have to take it into the world and put it to work! At some point in time we have to jump!

The early church was described by her opponents as “those people who have been turning the world upside down.” Bible scholar William Barclay has said that was one of the greatest compliments ever paid to Christianity! Can we be part of such a church today? We can if we depend on the power of the Holy Spirit who empowered the early church, and from that Spirit glean the courage to follow in the footsteps of our heritage.