

“These People”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church, Toano, Virginia  
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Acts 17:1-15

“These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.” This was the complaint from the solid citizens of Thessalonica about Paul and Silas. They must have been infuriated. Anyone who has read a letter written by Paul knows how argumentative he can be. And here in the Acts of the Apostles, he reportedly walked into the community synagogue not once, not twice, but three times on the Sabbath, theological guns blazing.

“This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you,” Paul pounded. We’d be equally upset if a devout Jew or Muslim came here to argue about how Jesus is NOT the Messiah. Or perhaps closer to home, when one of our Christian cousins declares that we’re not really Christian because we do this or don’t believe that. But worse than the audacity of Paul’s action, some of their compatriots actually bought it.

The scripture says that many believed and joined them, including “not a few of the leading women,” which had to be especially galling. Imagine if a holy-roller walked in here, breathing fire and brimstone, and your best friend, your closest confidante, your bridge partner stood up and shouted “Amen!” and followed him down the aisle and out the door. Well, that’s what happened for these people in the synagogue. No wonder they declared in desperation, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.”

It must have been just that disorienting, like somebody five hundred years ago finding out that the earth is not the center of the universe. Like a young person – or sometimes the not so young – when they finally discover that they are not the center of the universe. Like all of us, watching planes plunge into buildings, realizing that these images are from hell, not Hollywood. Indeed, “these people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.”

I wonder if people ever say the same thing about us, for better or for worse. I feel confident that there are those who do. At the Pocahontas Women’s Correctional Facility last Sunday, dozens of women spoke with great sincerity about their experience of Kairos, a three-day retreat sponsored by several tidewater parishes, including our own. Many of those inmates experienced genuine unconditional love for the first time, finding a peace beyond their imagining, the possibility of joy in the midst of a gloomy prison, hope despite a society that in reality rarely passes anything but a life sentence.

Through the open ears and hearts of the missionaries who served them, these women entered a new world, completely upside down from the one they had been inhabiting. In a prison culture where vengeance and self-hatred were the norms, now forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others has started taking hold. Not that the prison has become a utopian paradise, but by degrees, it is becoming more human and more holy.

Of course, it doesn’t take a radical, intensive effort like a retreat to change the world. All it takes is a special kind of snowfall. Let me explain. Once when concerned about my slow rate of learning, I went to a professor, expecting him to confirm my self-diagnosis of “not too bright.” Much to my surprise, this normally lucid thinker started asking me questions about snow.

“When it first starts snowing,” he asked, “what do you notice on the ground?” “Nothing. A little dusting,” I answered. “But if you go read a book and it keeps snowing and you look out the window a few hours later, what do you see?” “If it’s snowing hard enough, there’s a visible

layer of snow with blades of grass sticking up through the snow,” I answered. “What happens if the snow continues while you take a nap and watch a TV show and talk on the phone, then look out the window?” “The grass is gone. Everything’s white. The gullies are covered, and the whole surface contour of the land changes.” “That’s right,” the professor said. “You’re in your third semester. As far as your brain’s concerned, it just started snowing.”

Likewise, we can go through life, thinking that we’re worthless if we haven’t made some grand gesture, pulled off some amazing feat. So we do nothing, or what we do, we do without any real enthusiasm or excellence. And we ignore the little opportunities, and the little triumphs, that give us the chance to glorify God, help other people, and make our lives worth living.

For many, perhaps most, of us, our Christian pilgrimage is like watching snow fall. Constant, gradual, agonizingly slow at times, but transformative. Take, for instance, a simple allegory about snow, used years ago by a kind professor eager to relieve the anxiety of a paranoid, perfectionist. Paul Jones has long since forgotten that he reminded me about how snow falls, but I’ve never forgotten or stopped being grateful for that simple yet essential insight about life.

So pay attention. Keep alert. Watch what you say, and what you do, because the next kind words that exit your mouth, the next merciful act you perform, could change somebody’s life forever, and you might never even know about it. Until one day, you hear about “These people who have been turning the world upside down,” and realize that you played a part in that.

Yes, I think we can say that plenty of people would describe us as “people who have been turning the world upside down,” in ways both little and large. But I think we can also say, with equal confidence, that for lots of people, who we are and what we do – it’s all a big joke. And I’m not talking about arrogant people and their poorly informed disdain for religion. I’m not talking about shriveled up little cynics living in a world not worth saving or savoring. I’m not talking about the experts that measure the Body of Christ and declare it slightly slimmer than last year, or the cultural critics with their obsidian phrases, slick and opaque.

The people I’m talking about, and the people I worry about, are people very much like you and me. Honest people with a propensity to see and hear what they want to see and hear. Good people, some with horrible hurts, others terribly confused, still more outright bored. People. People with blood and bones and breath and brains, who want to live and make life count and enjoy it as much as possible. To these precious people, we often come across with as much authenticity as Disneyland. If we put out a banner by Richmond Road declaring, “Home of the people who have been turning the world upside down,” there would be accidents from the convulsive laughter.

At one level, I cannot understand that. But at another level, I can. We talk such a big game. A spiritual Savior raised from the dead. The power to bind and loose and heal and bless. A mustard seed of faith moving mountains. People baptized by the thousands at their very first hearing of the gospel. By comparison, we seem impotent and ridiculous.

Injustices, simple and great, go by unimpeded, while those going too slow or simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, get thrust to the gutter or trampled under foot. Churches caught in a consumer cycle of competition, so eager to conform to the dominant cultural model. An ethic of nationalism and greed so strong that the mildest prophetic critique is considered blasphemy. People are turning the world upside down alright, and the Church seems content to go along for the ride.

So what can we do? Some would say, “Nothing. Religion is a private matter. Public policy is none of the Church’s business. People should be left alone, free from intervention. The

door is open. Let them come if they want.” This option sounds distinctly opposed to the witness of scripture. In today’s lesson from Acts, Paul directly encountered an established religious institution in a non-violent yet vigorous way, to the extent that he converted some and drove others out into the streets shrieking in panic. Jesus himself was a radical, revolutionary interventionist. He caused so much trouble, the authorities decided the most expedient thing to do would be kill him. And they did, or at least they tried.

Others might suggest, “Let’s go back to the good old days, when the Church was powerful and popular and respected.” Problem is, the only way to go back to the past is to visit a museum or close your eyes and watch the memories dance by. Besides, it’s been my experience that the good old days were never that good. Segregation, institutionalized misogyny, a shroud of secrecy sheltering sinister sexual deeds. Not exactly what I’d call good days.

We could go through a plethora of responses to current struggles we encounter. Some say, “Emphasize the positive, and the negative will take care of itself.” Others insist that using a certain kind of music or liturgy or architecture or curriculum will do the trick. “Be open and free and forget all the rules,” some shout. While others demand, “Tighten up, require more of people.” Who do we listen to? Which expert shall we follow?

Well, all and none. A lot of contemporary kibitzing is not terribly original, and if we stick around long enough, we’ll see it again in a flashier package as “The New Way” for the Church Mediocre to save itself. At the same time, there are things to learn. However, before we avail ourselves of this, that, and the other, I think we need to center ourselves upon the foundation of our faith.

It is there that we will find the strength and courage to persist in doing justice and loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. It is there that we receive inspiration and wisdom to imagine the awesome possibilities of God’s power working through us. It is there that our purpose is purified by the fire of God’s Spirit, and we become focused on one objective with two parts: the glorification of God accomplished by loving ALL God’s creatures.

What is this foundation of faith? It is not a what, but a who, and you know who. Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Christ, crucified and resurrected, alive within us and among us and beyond us. There are more ways to connect with this foundation than we will ever know, but the basics are prayer, worship, study of scripture, and service. And those disciplines mean less the more we do them in a vacuum, away from the world, tucked in a safe corner called Church. But practiced with diligence and exposed the risky changes of life, we might become like Paul and Silas, willing to tell the truth to people not particularly interested in having it said, prepared to become unpopular to reconcile the world to God and bring peace.

It seems simple, but it is not easy, and so often it seems like the snowfall, though blizzards may come. My prayer for this parish, for each individual Christian that comprises it, my prayer for myself, is that someday we might hear of a person – either jumping with joy, or spitting in disgust – touched by this place, by these people – giving thanks or raising the alarm that “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.” Amen.