

Sunday October 24th, 2021

Acts 17:1-15

Series: Lessons from the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Thessalonica"

In an effort to build more ecumenical connections among Christians, the local Baptist, Presbyterian, and United church ministers were all invited to a special mass to be held at the local Catholic Church. The three ministers arrived a bit late, and discovered that every pew in the sanctuary was completely full. Therefore, the three pastors were forced to simply stand at the back of the sanctuary for the service.

The host priest noticed the three pastors standing against the back wall and in an effort to be more hospitable whispered to one of the altar boys, "Get three chairs for our Protestant friends." The altar boy didn't quite hear the request, so the priest spoke louder, motioning to the rear of the sanctuary: "Three chairs for the Protestants." Dutifully, the boy stood up, stepped to the rail and loudly proclaimed to the congregation, "Three cheers for the Protestants!" (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p.112)

Now that was a bit awkward, wasn't it? Not at all what the priest intended. "The best laid plans of Mice and Men, often go awry". This is a famous quote often attributed to William Shakespeare, but actually it was Robert Burns who penned these words. By now, having followed Paul the Apostle for a while on his missionary journeys, one may be led to think that Burns's words should have been Paul's motto in life. Nothing in Paul's missionary effort seems to go as one might expect, but Paul trusted God anyway.

Perhaps as we heard the lesson read for us today, you may have felt that this passage sounds so familiar. Paul comes; Paul preaches; some believe; there is a riot; Paul is threatened, and Paul leaves. But as repetitive as we may think all of this is, at each stop along the way, something new arises in the focus of the missionaries, and at each stop there are significant lessons to be learned. So, today we are in Thessalonica, which is in Greece.

Paul and Silas have now left Philippi where they were beaten and imprisoned, and now journey along a famous Roman roadway called the Ignatian Way. This particular road connected the Adriatic Sea with the Black Sea, and was a busy and important trade route.

Paul and Silas, actually travel through two towns on their way to Thessalonica, so clearly Thessalonica was the goal. Luke doesn't tell us much about the journey, but it's about 100 miles from Philippi to Thessalonica, or a good three days walk. Not an easy trek. The Holy Spirit clearly was leading them, but their reasons for bypassing other towns maybe because Thessalonica had a synagogue, and was a busy trading center. When the gospel took hold in Thessalonica, it would spread throughout the whole region.

"As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he interpreted the scriptures to the people." (vs.2) Paul explained how the prophecies in the Old Testament proved Jesus was the Messiah. Between Sabbaths, we know from 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8, that Paul and Silas worked to support themselves. Paul writes, "For you know that you ought to follow our example. We were never lazy when we were with you."

We never accepted food from anyone without paying for it. We worked hard day and night so that we would not be a burden to any of you.” The two men supported themselves likely making tents as was Paul’s trade. That is why some missionary work today is called “Tent Making Ministries”.

In other words, the missionaries go to a new place, and work a trade to support themselves while sharing the gospel. Actually, we are all in tent making ministries, if you really think about it. Luke is somewhat light on details here, but he does give us a picture of the result of Paul’s preaching in the synagogue. “Some who listened, and were persuaded, and became converts, including a large number of godly Greek men, and also many important women of the city.”

Luke wants us to understand that only a few Jews become converts, while the vast majority of new converts were Gentiles. This discrepancy in number between Jews and Gentiles is starting to be a pattern in the early church. The Gospel is clearly a greater draw to Gentiles and particularly women, and not just any women either. Luke tells us they were “important women”. In other words, these were Gentile women from the upper class of Thessalonica.

These were women of financial means, and women who were educated. Luke makes a regular mention throughout Acts that women were particularly attracted to the Gospel, such as we saw with Lydia last week. So, we might wonder, why? Why did the gospel speak so clearly to women? The best answer I could find was actually quite brilliant. These “important” women were women who were educated in, among many things, Greek Philosophy.

The debating and sharing of philosophical ideas, was a big deal to Greek speaking people in the region. We will see next week, when Paul goes to Athens, that groups of men, almost always men of financial means, or philosophers who had patrons to support them, were very happy to sit in the market place, for hours on end, debating all kinds of ideas. Today we call it Tim Horton’s.

Greek philosophy however, was not very appealing to women. Spiritually speaking, it was often void of meaning. Logic prevailed, but answers for the true meaning of life were often absent. Furthermore, a good selection of Greek Philosophy at that time, promoted practices and ideas that were degrading to women. Women, according to many Philosophy schools, were second class or worse. So, when Paul comes saying “In Christ there is no male or female”, the women came in droves to sign up.

In Christ, the Gentiles and particularly women, but also slaves, found a warm and loving welcome. Men and women, rich and poor, slave and free, all rubbed elbows with each other and broke bread together in the name of Christ. The Gentiles also came, without any of the religious baggage that our Jewish friends carried. As Paul preached in Thessalonica, and I believe in other synagogues as well, the Gentile worshippers heard Paul’s explanation of the scriptures and accepted it without reservation. To them it made complete sense.

To many, but not all, the theology Paul laid out was very logical. To the Jews however there was a different reaction. Everything was fine in Paul’s teaching until he came to one important and critical aspect of Jesus’ life. When Paul began to explore with his listeners the crucifixion and suffering of Jesus, he presented what he came to call a stumbling block, borrowing from Isaiah.

The Jews of Paul's day had no trouble expecting and celebrating a Messiah who was triumphant, powerful, and majestic. A Messiah who would crush Israel's enemies. A Messiah who would ride into Jerusalem on a white charger, not a borrowed donkey.

This was some of the same reservations Jews had with Jesus when he ministered in Israel. When Paul explained how in fulfillment of prophecy, Jesus: suffered, and died, then rose again, and the prophets predicted it, well they just couldn't believe it. This is actually quite odd, because the scriptures are full of predictions that describe the Messiah as a suffering servant. Passages like Isaiah 53:5-6.

"He was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed! All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the guilt and sins of us all." Oh, the Jews knew these scriptures, it was just that they were very uncomfortable with the idea of a suffering Messiah. Many chose to dismiss the whole idea, or tried to explain it away.

Believe it or not, there was actually a school of Jewish theology that promoted the idea that there were actually two Messiahs. One triumphant, and one suffering, to try and get around the problem. Paul runs into this problem of a stumbling block everywhere he goes. 1 Corinthians 1:18, "I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize the message as the very power of God."

Then he writes, "So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense." (1 Cor. 1:23) In Thessalonica we can really see the challenges that the early church was up against in sharing the gospel. To skeptics who were Jewish, the message was offensive, and to Gentiles or Greek speaking folks it was illogical. In other words, it was not a rational philosophy.

We will see this skepticism of Greek intellectuals even more clearly next week in Athens. Paul discovered something important in Thessalonica. He saw where the "rubber met the road", so to speak. Therefore, we see in Thessalonica, the beginning of Paul coming to the very core of his message. "We preach Christ crucified!"

Paul didn't water down the message, but the hard heartedness of some devout Jews, made it impossible for them to embrace Jesus. Not that all Gentiles embraced the Gospel either. Some, as I mentioned, thought it foolish, as we will see in more detail when Paul goes to Athens, but many more Gentiles than Jews did come to faith. And this pattern becomes even more pronounced over time.

Now there is one further little part of the story that we need to cover today. As I mentioned, another riot occurred due to Paul's preaching and the mob storms the house of man named Jason who was housing the two missionaries. Poor Jason, he was just showing hospitality, and now he gets dragged into the fray. Paul and Silas were not in the home at the time, so in their rage they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city council.

The mob accuses Paul and Silas of turning the city upside down, but Jason is guilty by association, for letting the two men stay in his home. They accuse Jason of treason, because he professes to serve another king other than Caesar, namely Jesus.

Only when bail is posted are the believers, including Jason, released. The lessons of the Thessalonian church are many but three things stand out in particular. The first is that the core message of the church is Jesus. That Jesus lived, was crucified and died and rose from the dead. Like Paul and Silas, we should never shy away from this message. To water it down, or alter it in any way is to deviate from the gospel and this is inexcusable.

The second lesson to learn from this stop on our journey is that when you do preach this core message, you will cause turmoil. Maybe not a riot, as was the case with Paul and Silas, but people will react strongly. Some will believe, some will dismiss the message as ridiculous, and some will find the crucifixion an offensive story. Do you remember these words from Hebrews 4:12-13?

“For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for who we really are. Nothing in all creation can hide from him. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes. This is the God to whom we must explain all that we have done.” This was Paul’s experience, and frankly it is still the experience of the church.

Many people do not like the message. They do not like to confront the sin and darkness in their lives. They do not like to admit they need salvation and certainly do not like to accept the cost of that salvation; namely Christ dying on the cross. The gospel message cuts to the core of our souls, and this is painful for all of us, but it is critical for us to receive life.

The third lesson from Thessalonians that I want to stress today is that of the experience of Jason. When the Gospel is being preached, and people are reacting very strongly, sometimes as a believer you get caught in the cross fire. Even if we are not the one who preached or witnessed to someone, their intense reaction can be directed at anyone who calls themselves Christian. This is what is happening to our brothers and sisters in Syria and Iraq right now.

ISIS, in its twisted religion, has taken offense to the message of Christ, and those who carry that message in their hearts. Even though many Christians are not necessarily standing on street corners trying to convert Muslims, they are still being persecuted and killed, simply because they are Christian. We need to be aware, even in Canada, of the ramifications of the Gospel being preached anywhere.

Offended by the message due to the convicting nature of the Gospel, anyone, at any time, can lash out on the most convenient Christian target they can find. That could be a church, a bible study group, or a household. If anger over the Christian message is being directed at us, we need to be compassionate, and realize that the Holy Spirit is working overtime on this individual, trying to penetrate a very hard heart. Our response therefore needs to be gentle and loving. I like that image from Hebrews of a very sharp knife.

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Paul's experience was re-lived by Tony Campolo when he was invited to come and speak to the students of West Chester University in Pennsylvania. Specifically, Campolo was asked to explain to the students how Christianity could be a movement that would foster positive and radical social change. Campolo welcomed the opportunity and with great passion spoke with great positive effect to the students.

The students were coming to see that Christianity could in fact be a primary means through which poverty, racism, sexism, and a host of other evils could be overcome by people joined together in a moment inspired by Christ and infused by the Holy Spirit. As he was doing his best to win over these secularized sociology students, a colleague, standing at the back of the auditorium, interrupted Campolo and shouted out loud and clear, "Tony! Tony! Be sure to tell them the cost!"

Tell them what it will cost them if they become the kind of Christians Jesus expects them to be. Explain to them the sacrifices that they will have to make if they are true followers of Jesus." Campolo states, he was stunned because the colleague was right. And as Campolo spelled out the cost, he could see the enthusiasm that once reigned in the classroom begin to drain away. (Stories that Feed the Soul, p.167) The Gospel is a sword and it cuts deep into all of us.

Some will respond positively, some with indifference, some even with hostility, but we are not responsible for the reaction of those who hear the message. We are only entrusted with getting the message out.