

Sunday March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Lent I

Acts 19: 21-41

Series: Lessons from the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Ephesus"

I came across a very touching letter, written by a man to his daughter's boyfriend. It reads, *Dear Tony: I have been unable to sleep since I did everything I could to break up your engagement to my daughter. Will you forgive and forget the foolishness of a man who only wanted the best for his little girl. I will admit that I was a bit harsh about all your tattoos and your Mohawk haircut.*

*In retrospect, I guess motorcycles are not all that dangerous. Furthermore, I was a bit harsh on you for not having a job and I am sure that lots of good people live under bridges. Sure, she is only eighteen and could go to Harvard on a full scholarship, but she wants to marry you. But you cannot learn everything from books. I sometimes forget how backward I can be. I was wrong to deny you both happiness, and I was a fool, but I have come to my senses, and you can have my blessing. Sincerely, your future father-in-law.*

Oh, don't forget the postscript to the letter. *PS Tony: Congratulations on winning the lottery.* None of us in this room are unacquainted with how money changes everything. As I have heard many times, "Everything and everyone has a price". For good or for evil, money seems to be the lynch pin on which everything turns. For example: in criminal investigations the adage applies, "follow the money".

In our journey through the early church, we have seen Paul face opposition for religious reasons, political reasons, and social reasons, but in Ephesus well....

At first read you may think that the opposition the church faced was all about religious differences, and I guess that was a contributing factor. However, by the time verse 21 rolls around, the church was somewhat established in Ephesus. Paul had already left the synagogue with any believers from there and was now preaching in a community lecture hall. It's kind of like a church plant meeting in a school. From Ephesus, many people heard the gospel, and many came to faith. People even experienced healing and exorcisms.

In an interesting twist, we read that after a botched exorcism, by some Jews using Jesus' name, a sense of reverence about God and Jesus fell upon Ephesus, and many more came to faith and abandoned their sinful ways. There was even, according to Luke, a book burning, where books on magic were destroyed in the value of several million dollars. That must have been some bonfire. It was after about two years in the region that Paul took it upon himself to return to Jerusalem and then onto Rome.

Luke makes some effort to clarify that this was Paul's idea to return to Jerusalem, and not the Holy Spirit's. His companions later try to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem, and when he gets there, he is arrested. Paul's motivation in going to Jerusalem was based on his desire to take a collection he'd been gathering for the mother church in Jerusalem to aid them. Paul believed that this collection would demonstrate a solidarity between Jewish and Gentile believers. It would ease some of the suspicion the Jewish brethren had of their Gentile counterparts.

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Meanwhile, trouble is brewing in Ephesus. A man named Demetrius, a prominent silversmith by trade, was becoming alarmed at the popularity and growth of the “People of the Way” or the church. Demetrius’ objection, although it sounds like a religious difference, is really all about money. In the city of Ephesus was the temple to the goddess Artemis, or in Latin the goddess Diana, who was the goddess of fertility.

Legend had it that the image of Artemis fell from the heavens and thus sparked a cult of devotion to her. And what a beauty she was this Artemis. Her image is that of a very grotesque multi-breasted woman. The temple in Ephesus was huge and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was four times the size of the Parthenon and could hold 50,000 worshippers. Demetrius and his guild of craftsmen made their living by creating silver niches, or statues, of Artemis and the temple, which they sold to tourists.

Christians are not above such commerce as you will discover if you visit St. Marie among the Hurons in Midland. The gift shop is quite extensive with many renderings of Mary and the shrine itself. These offerings are kind of like religious souvenirs.

For Demetrius it was a lucrative business, but the temple also spawned other businesses as well. The temple was critical to the city’s financial health. When Paul arrives in Ephesus, it is a shadow of its former self. Once a great shipping port, its trade business had all but dried up. It seems the city was at the mouth of a river, and silt continually filled in the harbor making regular dredging necessary, and very expensive, so eventually the port was all but abandoned.

Religious tourism was therefore the city’s biggest economic engine, when the gospel comes to Ephesus. Clearly Demetrius had noticed that the sale of his little trinkets had been on the decline since the “People of the Way” arrived. The silver smiths believed they were specially appointed by Artemis to honour her with their work, and making oodles of money didn’t hurt either. Most people can handle the exchange of ideas but threaten the pocketbook, well look out.

Demetrius must have been a prominent member of his guild of craftsmen because he begins to organize a protest. Look how he sells the protest. “Gentlemen, you know that our wealth comes from this business. As you have seen and heard, this man Paul has persuaded many people that handmade gods aren’t gods at all. And this is happening not only here in Ephesus, but throughout the entire province!”

Then as a kind of afterthought he says, “I’m also concerned that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will lose its influence, and that Artemis- this magnificent goddess worshipped throughout the province of Asia and all around the world-will be robbed of her prestige!” So, what really is Demetrius’ motivation? So, imagine that, the church being persecuted by the local Chamber of Commerce.

So, on the pretext of religious devotion a riot starts. People rushed to the amphitheater shouting “Artemis is great!” The shouting and rioting drew many other people, (I mean who doesn’t enjoy a good mob riot?) and soon the amphitheater, which could hold 25,000 people, was packed. Although Luke points out that a lot of people had no idea why they were there, they were simply drawn by the noise and the crowd.

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Along the way to the amphitheater, the mob grabs two companions of Paul: Gaius and Aristarchus. Now this is interesting. Paul was not allowed into the amphitheater, nor was he allowed to speak. On this occasion, Paul is sidelined. Paul even had friends who were government officials who begged him to stay away. The confusion in the amphitheater was great, and when a man named Alexander was forced forward to explain the situation, he was dismissed because he was a Jew.

For two hours the crowd continued to shout, “Great is Artemis!” Finally, the chief magistrate or mayor of the town silences the crowd. The mayor was anxious to end this mess lest he be held accountable to Rome for a riot. The mayor lays out the situation carefully and clearly, saying that the Christians have done nothing wrong. They haven’t stolen anything or said anything negative against Artemis.

If Demetrius and his craftsmen had any legal case against the Christians, let them seek legal recourse in the courts. If this silliness doesn’t end, Rome will come down hard on the city. Then the mayor dismissed the crowd and sent them home. The mayor must have had some pull to accomplish that. After this event, Paul says his goodbyes and heads out for Jerusalem. This passage is a very interesting one, because it is purely a historical rendering of an event.

There isn’t a lot of theology presented here for us to discuss, but something does emerge here that calls for our attention. When we think of Demetrius, the silversmith; what was his motivation in bringing charges against the church. I think we can be certain that money was at the root of it but think a bit deeper. Why was Demetrius losing money? People were not buying his souvenirs. He had seen his backlog of niches growing.

How was he to feed his family if no one is buying his creations? Now, let’s go deeper. Why were people not buying statues? He already told us. Paul was preaching that gods cannot be crafted by hand. So, if we were to sum up Demetrius’ charge against Paul and others, would it not be that Demetrius argued that the gospel had changed lives. This passage has little snippets of this change all through it.

Not only were the new converts to Christ not buying statues, but they were also avoiding the temple, and they were not patronizing the shops that drew on the temple patrons for support. The Christians burned their books on magic and pagan religion. The Christians turned from their sinful ways, meaning they no longer behaved like pagans, like visiting temple prostitutes. Do you see what Demetrius is saying, the gospel changes lives?

This is what Demetrius didn’t like, not on moral or religious grounds, but because it hit his pocketbook. The society of Ephesus, and beyond, was being remolded by the gospel. Once the gospel got ahold of someone, or a group of people, nothing was ever the same again. When the gospel came to town: religions fell, commerce was altered, politics was challenged, and people left their old ways. The gospel was like a great big pressure washer blasting away the grime.

It is like the old proverb, “If you bring a pig into the parlor, the pig will be changed not one bit, but the parlor will never be the same.” The gospel came into the world, and it has never been the same. When the gospel is at work, lives are altered, and people notice.

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J. Edwin Orr, the onetime professor of mission and church history at Fuller Theological Seminary, became an expert in the study of the great Welsh revival of 1906. Seldom has a revival swept over a nation as that revival swept over the Welsh people. People's lives were radically changed. Along the southern seacoast of Wales, stretching from Swansea to Cardiff, there were several shipyards.

For many years, the men who worked in those shipyards had pilfered tools-items ranging from hammers to wheelbarrows. When the revival struck, these men felt that true repentance required that they return what they had stolen. So many of them brought back stolen goods that the shipyards were soon overwhelmed. Dr. Orr loved to tell people he had records indicating that, at some shipyards, signs were put up that read something like this:

“If you have been converted because of the recent revival and are planning to return things that you have stolen from this shipyard, please do not do so. Keep what you have stolen. We have no more room for stolen goods.” (Stories to Feed your Soul, p.97) Such is what happens when a revival hits. It always results in changing what goes on in the world. The Gospel changed the people of Ephesus, and the consequences were obvious, just ask Demetrius.

This leaves two related questions that must be asked, that arise out of this passage in Acts. The first is simply this: how has your own life been changed by the gospel? Can we honestly say that having encountered Christ, and our lives are radically different than what they were before we met him? I recognize that all the changes needed in our lives do not happen overnight. Part of our maturing in Christ is “working out our salvation in fear and trembling”. (Phil. 2:12)

However, has my relationship with Christ changed how I live my life, interacted with my family, conduct my business, treat my co-workers, manage my money, etc.? True faith in Christ is transformative. If our faith is not continually molding us into people who are becoming more and more like Christ, then it really is no faith at all.

Yet, the story in Acts raises another related question. Not only should the gospel change our lives, but the Gospel should change our society. This is very much the same concept that Jesus was discussing when he talks about our being salt and light. Our influence is to be like a leaven, or yeast, that makes the whole loaf rise. So, we must ask ourselves; how is our neighbourhood, our city, our country, this world, better off because of our faith?

Another way to ask the same thing is the oft used question: “If First Baptist ceased to exist, would our absence even be noticed”? I think we miss an important point if we do not see that the work of Paul, and the other early missionaries, was not just about saving individuals or founding individual churches. The story in Ephesus demonstrates the hope of the apostle Paul that the gospel would shake things up.

He wasn't seeking a riot, but rather a revolution in people's hearts. Verse 20 reads, “So the message of the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect.” Can we claim a similar situation? I don't raise these ideas to make any of us feel guilty but rather to get us to think of grander possibilities. If the Gospel could affect Ephesus so powerfully, why not Simcoe, or Norfolk as a whole?

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Why not a revival in Norfolk akin to that in Wales? If we think it is not possible because of modern sensitivities, then we need to ask, where is our level of confidence in the gospel and in Christ. If only there was a word from God to boost our confidence. Oh wait, I know.

Paul writes, “Be strong with the Lord’s mighty power. Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil. For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against the wicked spirits in the heavenly realms.

Use every piece of God’s armor to resist the enemy in the time of evil, so that after the battle you will be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the sturdy belt of truth and the body armor of God’s righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News, so that you will be fully prepared. In every battle you will need faith as your shield to stop the fiery arrows aimed at you by Satan.

Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Always pray and on every occasion in the power of the Holy Spirit. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all Christians everywhere.” (Ephesians 6:10-18) Guess who Paul wrote these words to. Yes, to the Ephesians. So, let us gird ourselves for struggle ahead that lives may be changed, and God may receive the glory.