

“Children of God, Turning the World Upside Down”

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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If I were to come up with a sermon series title for the sermons we’re preaching in this season leading up to Pentecost, I might call it “Sermons on Weird Texts from Acts that don’t get preached on very often because they are not in the lectionary!” For the past couple of Sundays, we’ve been looking together at texts from the Book of Acts that are not in the lectionary and thus do not get preached on very often. Today, we continue that pattern with the story of Paul and Silas in Thessalonica and how their opponents stirred up a mob against them and against a person by the name of Jason who provided hospitality to them. Listen now to the story, and for what Paul and Silas are accused of:

After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.’ Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the market-places they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason’s house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.’ The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

Our second passage is just two verses from the first letter of John. It begins with words that we often use near the end of a baptism, which makes it very appropriate for this day.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, our rock and our redeemer. And may the Gospel be more to us than mere words. May the Holy Spirit produce in us strong conviction.

A few weeks ago, Judith and I went to go see the *movie Paul, Apostle of Christ*. As I watched the movie, which is set in first century Rome, where Paul is in prison awaiting execution during the time of Nero’s persecution of the church, I was reminded again that the early Christians did not have an easy time of it. Regarded as somehow threatening to Rome, peaceful followers of Jesus were imprisoned, beaten, used by Nero as human torches and fed to lions in the Roman circus. That’s not a pleasant thought, I know, and perhaps a terrible way to begin a sermon on a baptism Sunday. But it’s worth keeping in mind that this way of Jesus into which we baptize—into which we *have been* baptized—was from its earliest days compelling enough to die for to some and repellent

enough to others for them to try to stamp it out with violence, from Jesus' crucifixion forward. There was something about the way of Jesus that provoked strong responses, both positive and negative.

The Book of Acts doesn't let us ignore that. By the time we get to the text we read from this morning, Peter has been jailed more than once, Stephen has been stoned to death, James has been beheaded, and Paul and his traveling companions have been attacked, imprisoned, and followed from city to city by people stirring up mobs against them. Then in Thessalonica, they face more of the same.

Apparently, all it takes is three weeks of Paul teaching in the synagogue about a Messiah who was willing to suffer and die and a God who would not let that death have the last word and a Way that was not about the love of power but the power of love, for the people to whom Paul is talking to start to be persuaded.

They become persuaded that there's something to this way that Paul is talking about. In fact, not just some of the insiders in the synagogue but "a great many of the devout Greeks" and "not a few of the leading women" become convinced. In other words, Paul's message was attracting people who would have been on the outside—or the downside—of the religious tradition of the time. It was turning the social norms of the day on their heads. The text says that made those on the inside and the upside angry and jealous. They enlisted some ruffians to stir up a mob in the city against Paul and Silas. They went to Jason's house where Paul and Silas had been staying and accused Jason of harboring these people who had been "turning the world upside down" and saying there was another king besides the emperor.

A few years into my pastorate in the church in North Carolina, I met a man named Lynwood Hay. He was the stepfather of a woman in our church whose mother, Maggie, Lyn's wife, was very ill with cancer. I met Lyn and Maggie when I went to the hospital in Winston-Salem to visit her one afternoon. Lyn and Maggie and I hit it off, and over the years, even after Maggie died, I came to know a bit of Lyn's story.

He grew up a Baptist in Georgia and Alabama, and sometime in the 1960's—after he'd moved to North Carolina—he had a profound spiritual experience that led him to have a deep heart for and to want to bring God's love in Christ to "the hippies" who were living in a part of Iredell County called Love Valley. It was the sort of the Woodstock of North Carolina. Lyn, who was a counselor but never received any formal seminary training, began an outreach to that community, and lo and behold, the power of Lyn's love in Christ started to change those young people's lives. Lyn started to bring groups of them to one of the prominent Baptist churches in Statesville. It didn't take many Sundays of that for people to pull Lyn aside and say, "Aaaahh. Ummm... Lyn, we don't know how to say this. But unless those people dress like us and act like us, they are not welcome here. And neither are you."

Here's the remarkable part of this story. Eventually, Lyn and his group of hippies wound up—believe it or not—in a Presbyterian church, where they were welcomed, at least for a few years. That is until there was a change in pastoral leadership and the people who didn't like how these new people and their faith turned the world turned upside down got it back the way they wanted it.

It wasn't until 15 years later, after I came to know Lyn and Maggie, that he found his way back to a congregation—the church that Judith and I were serving, the church where his stepdaughter and her children, his grandchildren, were attending. He died a few years before he could see his step-

grandson, Daniel, who I had in my confirmation class, be ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 2016. I could not be prouder of Daniel—a pastor who has known personally and proudly preaches the inclusive love of God in Christ.

A love which reaches across social divides, and embraces people in their differences, and speaks up on behalf of those who are being unjustly treated, and is willing to see and treat everyone as a beloved child of God, will *always* encounter opposition—because that is the way the world works. But it will also *always bear fruit*—because that is the way the upside down, inside out love of God in Christ works.

Just take a look at how Jesus talks and acts in the Gospels, specifically in the Gospel of Luke—to which the Book of Acts is Volume II. If Paul and Silas are accused of turning the world upside down, they can just point to Jesus and say, “We are only following his example.” It starts back before he is ever born.

His mother Mary, after receiving a blessing from her cousin Elizabeth who tells her she is carrying the Messiah, magnifies the Lord, singing, “God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant. God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

When Jesus is born, in a feed trough, it is the humble shepherds who come to see him first.

When he gives his famous sermon, in Luke it is not on a mountain like in Matthew’s gospel, but on level ground—as if to say, “this message is accessible to the lowly and those on the downside.” Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God; blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled; blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh; blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, and revile you on account of the truly human one, for your reward is great.” And he goes on—in perhaps my least favorite part of Luke—to deliver woes to people on the upside of society. I’d like to just take that out.

And all through his ministry, Jesus tells stories about reaching out to the outsider, the least, the last, the lost. A shepherd leaving the 99 behind to find the one last sheep, a father rushing out to greet a wayward son and throw him a feast, a Samaritan who shows compassion while the insiders walk by a person in need, a widow who pleads her case with an unjust judge. Jesus learns from the Syro-Phoenician woman that the Gentiles need the love and care of God, too; he reaches out to lepers and tax collectors and a wild man in a graveyard, and he blesses little children. All through his life and ministry, Jesus turns the world upside down, making wrongs right, bringing outsiders in, and seeking out those who are lost

Okay. So what does that mean for you and me? What does that mean for little Olivia, the latest person to be drafted as one of Jesus’ followers?

In a marvelous sermon he preached on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the Congregational Church in Rupert, Vermont, Frederick Buechner talks about some research he did into the history of that congregation. When renovations led to a new steeple with a bell being installed in the year 1831, after the steeple was added, an agile man in the congregation stood on his head in the belfry with his feet towards heaven. His name was Lyman Woodard.

In that sermon Buechner said, *That's the one and only thing I've been able to find out about this man, whoever he was, but it is enough. I love him for doing what he did. It was a crazy thing to do. It was a risky thing to do. It ran counter to all standards of New England practicality and prudence. It stood the whole idea that you're supposed to be nothing but solemn in church on its head just like Lyman himself standing upside down on his. And it was also a magical and magnificent and Mozartian thing to do.*

If the Lord is indeed our shepherd, then everything goes topsy-turvy. Losing becomes finding and crying becomes laughing. The last become first and the weak become strong. Instead of life being done in by death in the end as we always supposed, death is done in finally by life in the end. If the Lord is our host at the great feast, then the sky is the limit.

I love that. Jesus turns the world upside down. So should we.

One of my very favorite family photographs is of a time when my daughters were small and Judith and I served churches in upstate New York. It's a Monday, our Sabbath day, and Judith and I have taken the girls out to Crown Point for a picnic. In the picture I'm stretched out on a picnic blanket, and I'm holding my younger daughter Martha, who was maybe a year old at the time, and I'm holding her upside down. She is grinning from ear to ear. I love that picture.

Perhaps what happens when we take part in a community of faith is that we look at and live in the world in a different way. We look at it upside down in order to see it God's way up.

In a world that says, hold on to what you have, we hear it is in giving that we really gain.

In a world that increasingly says, "You're in this tribe, I'm in that tribe," the church says we can get beyond tribalism.

In a world that says, "Don't get involved with *those* people," we send our confirmands—like we did yesterday—down into the city to get to know some homeless men and women and to hear their stories.

In a world that says, "You'd better hate your enemies," in the church we say, "Well, Jesus said, we have to love them."

We live in God's world. Actually, I think most of the time this world in which we live really is upside down. Jesus helps us to see it right-side up. **This** is the way into which we baptize.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner is an ordained Presbyterian minister and the author of more than thirty published books. *The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction* was published in 1992 by HarperOne.