

B Narrative 31
Easter 4
April 17, 2016
Pastor Alison Shane

Acts 17:1-9

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

A spiritual director I know once wrote that when she hears something three times from three different sources, it's time to really pay attention, because it's the Spirit trying to get her attention. That happened to me this week. Three times this week, I have heard God calling this congregation to stand on its head.

In our reading from Acts, we heard the story of Paul and Silas, the story of the spread of the gospel, the story of Thessalonica, the story of the Jewish leaders, the story of Jason. We have heard our story.

Paul and Silas go to Thessalonica, and Paul goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath for three weeks straight. In the synagogue, Paul enters the Messiah debate, arguing from scripture, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that the Messiah was, indeed, Jesus. This explaining he did was really a revealing, an opening. This word is used three times in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This word is used to describe Jesus opening to them the things about himself in scripture. It's used to describe the disciples' eyes opened to finally recognize Jesus. And it's used by the disciples to again describe how Jesus opened the scriptures to them. Paul was opening the scriptures to them.

Debate of this sort was normal. There was no "arguing" like we think of; it's more like debate team in high school. Jewish men would gather at the synagogue, someone would bring up a topic, and the men would debate, quoting scripture and, later, Talmud, and off they'd go. We don't do things quite this way in our culture. We don't debate simply for the sake of debate, and we put so much passion behind our arguments now, that there's little listening, learning, or being willing to be changed. But in the church, we still debate. When something rises to the surface enough times that we can see that the Spirit is calling us to conversation, we talk, and we start with scripture. Scripture has been used to justify racism, and out of scripture came the church's stand against racism. Scripture has been used to justify sexism, and when the debate for women's ordination came before the Lutheran church bodies, it was scripture that formed the basis of the argument for ordaining women. Scripture has been used to justify sexual discrimination, and scripture has been the basis for the church's stand for justice.

It's not an easy thing, these scriptural debates. Arguing amongst ourselves feels contrary to the gospel. But that's sometimes how God gets us to move. That's what happened in the Reformation (Roman Catholics arguing with Roman Catholics) and that's what was happening in Thessalonica: Jews arguing amongst themselves. And when the leaders of the church found that people were convinced by Paul and Silas, they reacted out of fear and jealousy, and they sought to have them forcibly removed from town. And like they did with Jesus, they roped in the civil leaders to do their dirty work for them.

Poor Jason was caught in the crossfire. He had "entertained [Paul and Silas] as guests," and he ended up dragged before the city authorities because of his ties with those who had been

“turning the world upside down...acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.”

This is what the gospel does, after all...turning the world upside down. Jesus enters the scene and suddenly, those who were on top are on the bottom and those who were on the bottom are on the top. This is the Jesus we know and love. This is the gospel, the good news, turning the world upside down.

And we love the gospel. Until it turns OUR world upside down.

When things go upside down, the church has a long history of abdication, stepping back when we should be standing up for the gospel, for love and freedom and justice. At other times, the church has stood up, but instead of standing for love and freedom and justice, the church has reacted out of fear and jealousy, propagating injustices in the name of Christ. The church has allowed and even encouraged fear to trump love.

Think back. Have you experienced that church? I have.

The church also has a long history of standing up, speaking up. When the Spirit busts through our fear and turns the church upside down, stands the church on its head, the church stands in support of people

Think back. Have you experienced this church? I have.

God is calling the church to stand on its head. God is renewing the church upside down.

Can we, as a congregation in this church, be opened to scripture like the disciples on the road to Emmaus?

Can we be opened to recognize Christ like them?

Can the Spirit get past our fear and jealousy and open us?

Can we practice radical hospitality like Jason, without thought of consequence to ourselves (and even pay the fines)?

Can we be renewed and transformed to reflect God's wonderful diverse, messy world in the church, in this congregation?

Yes. God is calling the church to stand on its head. God is renewing the church upside down. God's crazy, upside down gospel is working on us.

The gospel. Jesus ate with sinners. Jesus called the Pharisees (us) to repentance.

Jesus sought out the contagious. Jesus called the rich (us) to give everything.

The gospel is love. Justice. Freedom.

And when that gets through our Pharisaic hearts, we are turned upside down. When we experience the love God has for us, God stands us on our heads. Because God chooses you. Despite your fear, despite your jealousy, God chooses you. And not content to let you remain in your sin, in your fear and jealousy, God replaces it with love. Upside down, radically hospitable, messy, diverse love.

In this church, the body of Christ, made up of crazy, messy, diverse, sinful people (what was God thinking?!), God is at work. God chooses the church. Despite its sinfulness, despite its fear and jealousy, God loves the church BECAUSE it's made up of people. And God is not content to let the church remain in sin, in fear and jealousy, so God replaces it with love. Upside down, radically hospitable, messy, diverse love.

God is calling the church to stand on its head. God is renewing the church upside down, to stand up for our neighbor, to stand up, shout out for love, for freedom, for justice in the name of Christ. Amen