

Welcoming an Upside-Down World

Acts 17:1-15

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This passage of scripture probably doesn't get a lot of airtime because it is not an appointed text in the Common Lectionary, from which so many preachers choose our lessons. That is a shame actually because it is a narrative that shows up in our pews on a weekly basis. Here we have two separate occasions of people gathering for worship and engaging in Bible study with two different responses among the hearers.

In Thessalonica, some hear and believe, and others do not. They are incited to fury because the gospel is disturbing the peace; it is interrupting the status quo; and the unconverted just want to keep on keeping on under the rule of the Roman emperor. Away with the rumors of resurrection and away with any attempt to turn the world upside down in the name of Jesus Christ!

But in Beroea, the people are more receptive. They welcome the message eagerly. Many believe. And when the ruffians from Thessalonica come over to Beroea to stir up trouble, the believers there protect Paul, and send him on his way to Athens. Silas and Timothy stay behind for a bit to help clean up the fellowship hall after the brawl, and the protestors from Thessalonica go home.

Now, we don't regularly enjoy so much high drama around Bible study in most of our congregations, but at the core of this text is a question that walks into our churches whenever we open the doors. Why do some hear the gospel, believe it, and go on their way rejoicing? And why do others resist it? Why does one partner in a marriage come to worship alone most weeks because the other either has less room for faith or little need for the church? How is it that siblings, raised in the same religious tradition choose differently when they have a choice, and one sinks deep roots into Christian community while the other does not? How is it we raise our children in the faith, and they get confirmed, or graduate from high school, and they walk away, with little interest or time or inclination to come back to church for more? Why are the numbers of the so called "Spiritual but not Religious" growing, and those who make the kind of deep commitment to serve the church as active members, elders, deacons, and pastors are in decline?

Well I don't know whether you would consider this good news, but our scripture reading would certainly suggest that this is not a new reality. The same thing happened among the early Christians in Thessalonica and Beroea! Some hear the Word of God, take it to heart, believe it, risk embracing a new order of things made visible and tangible in Jesus Christ, and others simply say – leave my world the way it is.

Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker* ended an article on the fading of faith and the rise of the New Atheism movement, saying: "The wondering [about God] never comes to an end. Relatively peaceful and prosperous societies tend to have a declining belief in a deity. But did we first give up on God and so become calm and rich? Or did we become calm and rich, and so give up on God?"¹

Here in Acts, the same agitating, world changing, transformative Word of God

proclaimed finds a welcome among some, a slammed door from others. How do we, who find our life in the Risen Christ, pry open that door and invite others to believe?

I prefer to support local bookstores and meander slowly browsing through the aisles, but occasionally some time constraint will find me clicking a book order online. I know it is simply a function of advertising, but I find it humorous that whenever you order a book from Amazon, the message pops up that others who ordered this same book also enjoyed buying..., and a whole bunch of other titles appear.

Say, for example, you are looking for Barbara Brown Taylor's new book on spirituality, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, and a few clicks away you are exposed to the following: *Letters to a Young Doubter*; *A New Kind of Christianity*; *Simply Christian*; *Almost Christian*; *The Future of Faith*; *Religion for Atheists*; *Invasion of the Dead*; *The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*; or my favorite new title, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*.

Even we, we who have come to believe, are searching, it would appear – searching, searching, searching – to understand why some open their hearts to the gospel that the world has been turned upside down by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because death has lost its power. And others do not. Is there any discernible difference between what happens in Thessalonica where there is more resistance to the gospel and in Berea where Paul's hearers are more receptive? Actually there is.

In both places, Paul goes into the synagogue and engages in the practice of a biblical exegete – part teacher, part preacher. The text uses strong verbs: Paul argued, explained, and proved, carefully sifting the evidence to mount a persuasive case from the scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah. But in Berea, Paul also “examined” the scriptures, and this word *examined* is a legal term used nowhere else in the New Testament for the study of scripture. It is borrowed from the law firm and courthouse, from the cultural language outside the faith as “legal” testimony to give credence to the gospel's claims about Jesus. Paul uses the secular language of the world to make his case for the faith.

Also, in Berea they studied the scripture not just on the Sabbath, but every day. Those who come to believe in the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ seem to commit to the complicated, hard, communal work of studying scripture together. In his commentary, Robert Wall says, “Few passages in Acts so clearly express the importance of scripture” to nurture the Christian life.² The implication is that if the Thessalonians had taken the effort to search the promises of scripture not just once a week, but daily like those in Berea, they too would have come to understand its truth.

You know, we can order all kinds of contemporary books to better understand Christianity's rub against the culture today, but the answer to why people come to faith according to this text is here in the Bible, in our holy script. If we are worried about the numbers declining, it seems this text is above all else calling us, and the people we serve, to deepened, daily, devotional, creative, invitational Bible study. Bible study that welcomes the unconverted to the table, particularly those who question the stuff of faith asking: What difference does it make?

I just finished a little novel by Francisco Stork called *Marcelo in the Real World*. It's a winner of a family book award for teens, a New York Times notable children's book, and on a Top Ten list for young adults. Well, I'm no young adult, but I found

Marcelo to be one of the most captivating protagonists I've encountered in some time. Marcelo is high functioning on the autism spectrum, having been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. He is smart, quiet, kind, and compassionate with a special love for animals and for God. He has lived a protected life, attending a private school for children with special needs, and has worked there, caring for therapeutic ponies who help the students gain confidence amid their special kinds of developmental challenges. Through the support of this school, his doctor, his family, his Catholic faith, and a Jewish rabbi friend, Marcelo makes great progress in understanding his special way of processing things and how to read the cues that will help him relate better to others.

When Marcelo is seventeen, his father, with deep love and high hopes that his son is ready to be mainstreamed into public school, decides it is time Marcelo learn how to navigate the "real world." A Harvard educated corporate lawyer, his father gives him a summer job in the law firm mail room. "This summer you must follow the rules of the... real world," his father tells him, and Marcelo knows what that means. He will engage in small talk with people, look people in the eye and shake their hands, try to understand their facial expressions, and refrain from discussing his special interest in God. He is to pretend that he is normal according to the definition put forth by the "real world."

On the first day of his summer job, Marcelo's father finds him getting ready to leave the house for work by praying his rosary, and he teaches him yet another lesson about the real world: "I want you to be religious but, at the same time, I want you to participate in the day-to-day world, my world, and your world too now... People in the workaday world are discreet about their religion. They pray in private. They don't quote scripture unless it's a figure of speech like, I don't know..., 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth..., the blind leading the blind.' Things like that. Phrases that have common usage."

"Jesus' exact words," Marcelo responds, were, 'Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?' Luke, chapter six, verse thirty-nine." "That's exactly what I mean," his father says. "It's not customary to quote scripture to someone, much less quote him chapter and verse. I think that if you're going to benefit from this experience, it's important that you try to act as is customary."

Marcelo takes out his little yellow notebook he keeps in his shirt pocket and writes: *Do not pray so that others see... do not quote scripture... Note: Listen for religious phrases that have become figures of speech. Those are allowed even if not accurate. Do not provide correct version or cite where it appears in the Bible.*³

Thus, Marcelo begins his summer job where he will discover in three month's time that "the real world" is about competition, the assumption that most people are looking out for number one, and making a profit even if sometimes it means inflicting pain on another. As he puts it, Marcelo comes to understand that "the real world will always poke you in the chest with its index finger."

But Marcelo, who reads his Bible and remembers chapter and verse, never lets go of the words of Jesus, "Be in the world but not of the world." Refusing to let go of his love for God and his study of scripture, Marcelo also discovers a whole community of people out there in the real world who are not just out for number one, who care about people who suffer, who make sacrifices to help those in need, and who break the rules of the real world when it is the right and just thing to do. It turns out this

teen with special challenges learns to navigate “the real world” without letting go of his faith, love, and the compassion of Jesus Christ.

Why is it that some hear the Word, come to believe, and live the good news of the gospel, and others have no inclination to welcome the upside down world of the Risen Christ? According to Acts, it has something to do with taking this Word seriously, reading the Bible daily, examining Scripture thoroughly, and responding in faith to recognize the real world is actually the life we have come to know in the Risen Christ.

Notes

1 Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker*, Feb. 17, 2014.

2 Robert W. Wall, *The Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Acts*, vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 238.

3 Francisco X. Stork, *Marcelo in the Real World* (New York: Scholastic, 2009), 42.