



Never the Same

Sermons on the Book of Acts

Summer Preaching
at State College
Presbyterian Church
State College, PA

The Reverend Dean Lindsey
Summer, 2018

The Spirit comes into the lives of that small band of Jesus' followers and nothing will ever be the same! That is the story of the Book of Acts. It is the Spirit moving believers to live out their faith as they build communities of caring and offer for all to hear their witness to the Risen Christ.

The church faces challenges, both internally and externally. They can no longer be complacent about the way things were. They experience the joy of trusting in God's provision and the agonies of failing in trust. The stories of Acts are exciting and moving. Hopefully, that is what you will discover as you read the pages which follow. These sermons, preached in the Summer of 2018, deal with matters ranging from the use of wealth, to civil disobedience, to the idols we create, to the call to make common purpose with "enemies," so called. It's all there in the Book of Acts, and it definitely applies to the church of today as we seek to navigate through the complex political and social context in which we find ourselves. The lives of the early followers of Christ are never the same, and neither are ours as we seek to be faithful followers, too.

"Never the Same"

Sermon of the Reverend Dean Lindsey

Pentecost Sunday

May 20, 2018

Acts 2:1-21

Two thousand years later we are still remembering the miracle of Pentecost. It's a dramatic event that is well-worth retelling. Before the arrival of the Holy Spirit that first Pentecost, the followers of Jesus are part of a tightly-knit group, fearful about the outside, and uncertain about their future. Because of what happens on Pentecost, the church becomes universal in its attention, empowered in its mission, and confident in its hope for the future. In essence, the church, as we know it, does not exist before Pentecost, and that is why we celebrate this day as the birthday of the church. According to the book of acts, 3,000 new converts are baptized in a single day!

Yet, we know this birth, indeed every birth, creates unique challenges. Adjustments must be made. Schedules must change. New responsibilities emerge.

Much is gained that Pentecost day, but it may be worthwhile to talk, at least briefly, about what is lost. Scripture tells us that their numbers increase, but that means the followers of Jesus are no longer a small, intimate group. Although Jesus draws large crowds as he preaches and heals, the committed group of followers who travel with him and support him never grows large. Before Pentecost, they all know each other by name. Afterwards, that is no longer possible. Before Pentecost, almost all of the followers of Jesus hail from the same area, small towns near the Sea of Galilee. They share the same history. They speak the same language. Afterwards, new converts come from throughout the Roman empire. They represent numerous regions. They speak many different tongues. They are part of the Jewish diaspora that over the previous several centuries has spread across the entire Mediterranean basin. No doubt, most can communicate in Greek, the lingua franca of the day, but they are more comfortable in the native languages of the places where they live. In other words, it's not always easy for them to understand each other because of language barriers and differences in background and upbringing and family experience.

We can certainly imagine a little bit of complaining on the part of the old guard. "Things were much better before. It was much simpler when there weren't so many other voices speaking." Dealing with the conflicts between the old and the new, between

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tradition and innovation, between those established in the faith and a large and increasing number of novices, consumes much of the attention of the early church. Paul writes, in his letter to the Romans, "Welcome those who are weak in the faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions."

Beginning today and continuing through much of the summer, our preaching will concentrate on the Book of Acts. You'll see that there will be a lot of quarreling. Of course, that's not all there is. The Book of Acts tells a magnificent story. It's the life of the church as it grows, reaching new people and places in witness and in service. There are miracles ahead, but also threats that must be faced as the early evangelists sometimes encounter fierce resistance from governing officials and even angry mobs.

Still, it is internal dissension that seems even more vexing. Differences in social class or religious background, among others, lead to differences in style and challenges to mutual understanding. These are things that the early church has to work out as it moves from its homogenous roots in Jewish Galilee and Judea and into the cosmopolitan, polyglot, religiously plural world of the Roman Empire. The experience of these early Christians should be a reminder to us that controversy in the church is not some malign recent development. It's been with us forever, and will continue to be so. In fact, it is a sign that we are doing the right things. It shows we are stretching ourselves when there are conversations in which divergent voices speak out.

This tells us clearly that the answer to disagreements should never be to slam the door shut. To aim for ever greater levels of similarity or insularity. To say, "we need to keep certain kinds of people in and keep other kinds out." Paul writes, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you."

"Welcome" is an imperative that recurs throughout the New Testament. Repeated often, because it's easy to forget to be welcoming.

For sure, the church has its patterns and traditions. Important things that we do together. But here is the challenge. We cannot allow those patterns to end with us. We want them to continue beyond us, and after us. In other words, we want to share what we hold most dear, entrusting it to others. Because if we guard it too closely, and at the expense of new relationships, we destroy it.

Every Christian congregation deals with a tension between holding on and letting go, between attending to the needs and desires of those on the inside and reaching out to those on the periphery, between honoring the past and welcoming the future. Spirit-inspired, the early church does this well, and we still marvel at the miracle. However, there are so many times we do not do it well.

The neighborhood changes, and a church cannot accommodate to a new population. Or a congregation starts to age a bit and cannot find ways to connect with a new generation. Of course, I am not simply describing what can happen to a Presbyterian church. It is true of all kinds of churches: Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, suburban, urban and rural.

Not long ago, a couple was visiting here from another congregation. They told me on the way out of the sanctuary, "We love coming to your church to see the children here, because there are no children in our church."

"None?" I asked. "Not a one," they responded, and then they laughed as they said, "In fact, they call us the youth group." You've probably already guessed that this couple was a good ten years older than me.

There are many different people that the church can and should reach. Many we need to welcome in. People of varied economic backgrounds; racial, ethnic or gender identity; as well as people of all ages. With all of these groups, we need the power of Pentecost to help us speak with them. And of no group is that more true than the young.

Each succeeding generation has its own issues and idiosyncrasies. When I was growing up, there was almost endless discussion about the generation gap. We all got tired of hearing about it.

Yet, it does exist, and probably to a greater degree right now than in a previous generation, due at least in part to whole new patterns of socialization, new types of entertainment, and a range of technologies and modes of communication, which, oddly enough, can make it harder to hear and understand one another across the generational lines.

Right here in the church, communication is vital but it is also one of our biggest challenges. In order to learn about church activities, some members need to see it in printed form, sent through the mail. Others who are a bit younger don't look at snail mail, and forget about calling on a land line. They want email or they only communicate through Facebook. When it comes to my children, however, email doesn't work and Facebook doesn't either. It's got to be a text or it will never get through to them.

Part of working across generational lines is something we celebrate this morning as we honor the work of our Stay and Play teachers and leaders. What we offer here are not rote lessons; we're not trying to pour information into the minds of little people, but rather we want to build relationships. That is key. Helping children to enjoy being in a community of fellow learners and with adults they can trust and who will listen to them.

That same philosophy guides all of our ministries with young children, adolescents, and high school youth. We do all these things because we want them to experience the fullness of

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God's love, and with that comes singing and laughing and play and (yes) learning to live together. These are the kinds of sights and sounds that fill our halls each week, thanks be to God.

Young people who show up at college today . . . are tuned into and completely cynical about the manipulations of social media, advertisers, and political leaders. And, by the way, they are cynical about the church, too.

So, you see, our mission as a congregation is not simply to put some younger people in the empty spaces in our pews or classrooms. It is to make sure that these very same young people have the opportunity to experience vitality in all of life with an active faith, expressed in and nurtured through worship, education, fellowship and service . . . for their whole lives long. There is no more important work for the church of today.

That work includes ministry with college-age students, too. It is a commissioning to this ministry that established our church in the first place and will continue to be primary to our purpose here. This summer, we are committing (and recommitting) ourselves to expanding this ministry as we seek to bring on a new staff member to serve as our Associate for Campus and Young Adult Ministries. Diana Malcolm,

our departing leader in this area has worked ever so hard these past several months to ensure, not simply a smooth transition so that this ministry can continue, but so that it can thrive in new and exciting ways. What a gift to us, to her successor, and to the many students and young adults who will be a part of whatever comes next.

It will not be easy work. That is why we all need to be a part.

There are stresses unique to this moment in time. Young people who show up at college today have been traumatized by a constant succession of school shootings. They have been desensitized to the costs of armed conflict as our nation has been at war their whole lives long. Most of them will finish school with the burden of debt and therefore will face enormous pressure to succeed in the sharp-edged competition for well-compensated employment. They are tuned into and completely cynical about the manipulations of social media, advertisers, and political leaders. And, by the way, they are cynical about the church, too.

Not all of them, but enough that those who want to be a part of the church and to be faithful Christians tend to be somewhat quiet about it among their peers. They need our encouragement, and our prayers. They need us to listen to them.

Pentecost requires us to pay attention and to listen as old men dream dreams. As young men see visions. As sons and daughters prophesy.

This is what the miracle of Pentecost demands. It's not just about speaking. It's also about listening. Remember that some standing nearby think that the Peter and the disciples are speaking nonsense. "They are filled with new wine," they complain. Pentecost requires us to pay attention, to listen, as old men dream dreams. As young men see visions. As sons and daughters prophesy.

When we do so with love and compassion, we will hear their longings and dreams. To come of age in a world where children will not have to train in live shooter drills, but in which they will be safe and secure at home and on the streets and in their schools. They see a world in which the races live in harmony. In which the odd-ball and the misfit and the geek are no longer bullied but can laugh and play and find common purpose with the jock and the beauty queen and the prepster. They know the day will come when we will honor the earth God has given and use its gifts with wisdom and self-control. The air will be clean. The water will be pure. There will be food for everyone. All will be fed; all will be loved, and all will live free from fear.

This is the dream of what will surely come. It is the vision of the young. And of the old. Because it is God's kingdom creating a new world for us to live in. That is why we have Pentecost. So that we can invite everyone else to live in that new world with us.

“Son of Encouragement”

Sermon of the Reverend Dean Lindsey
State College Presbyterian Church
June 17, 2018

Acts 4:32-5:5

Compare and contrast. That is the prompt that teachers sometimes provide on an essay question. Compare and contrast two writers or two historical figures or two artists. Of course, what can make this an interesting exercise is when there really is a contrast, but not to the point that the two distinctive actors are so far apart that they hold nothing in common. So let's start today with the similarities.

Joseph of Cyprus, who is nicknamed Barnabas by his peers, and Ananias and his wife Saphira seem quite different, certainly in the ways that they are remembered in the Book of Acts and in the history of the church. However, they start out so much the same. Each of them has a Hebrew name. That is significant, because among the Jewish population that has spread widely across the Hellenistic world, many have begun to give their children Greek names. Although Joseph, soon to become Barnabas, comes from the island of Cyprus, he is identified as one of the Levites, priests of the temple in Jerusalem. In other words, he is a traditional Jewish believer, and likely that is a fair description of Ananias and Saphira, too. Traditional, Aramaic speaking Jews, perhaps from right there in Judea where the story takes place.

Ananias and Saphira pretend *not* to be holding back. They want everyone to think *they are all in*. That they are *totally* committed. That they are completely dedicated to this community of grace and the Savior they worship and serve. Except they are not.

There is another commonality that is important to note. They have responded to the gospel. They are followers of Christ along with many others in the growing movement centered at this point in the city of Jerusalem. Not yet called Christians, because at the time of the story, the word does not even exist, but they are baptized believers, believers in the Lordship of Jesus.

They are also similar in another very significant way. They are well-off. This is easy to deduce, because they are land owners, and in the ancient world, only the privileged few own land of any significant size. Land is the most important source of wealth in antiquity, so families jealously guard it through strategic marriages and primogeniture. Landowners profit from rent, that is, from the labors of others. That makes Barnabas and Ananias and Saphira part of an exclusive social class, and in the rigid hierarchy of the

ancient world, that would generally mean that they stick with their own and have limited interaction with others of lower social classes unless they happen to be their servants or slaves.

Their presence in this story with other believers in Jerusalem introduces us to one of the prominent features of the post-resurrection church. People of different social classes are mingling together and supporting one another in an excited atmosphere of religious revival. We've already been told that the leading Apostles Peter and John are "uneducated and ordinary men," but these other three are not. They have privilege. They have status. They have disposable wealth. What will they do with it?

As a student pastor, the summer after my first year of seminary, I was assigned to preach on this very story of the death of Ananias and Saphira. I thought I did a pretty good job dealing with this troubling passage, but the pastor, my supervisor, said to me, "I'm glad you didn't preach that on Stewardship Sunday." I learned soon enough that he wasn't kidding me but was subtly correcting me, not because I had offended the congregation, not even close, but because I had tried to soothe them. I avoided mentioning the perils that money and wealth create for people of faith, as well as the opportunities. I failed to make a connection between the choices Ananias makes and our own choices.

Luke in his gospel and in the Book of Acts never shies away from money matters. He reports the story of the rich young ruler who can't part with his wealth, and unique among the gospel writers, he alone relates Jesus' parables of the Rich Fool who builds larger barns to store his bounty, only to die that night, and the parable of the Good Samaritan, the outsider who generously offers compassion and monetary support to an injured stranger.

In the life of faith, we can't avoid thinking and talking about our possessions and our material wealth, because these things matter. In the Book of Acts, greed and the misuse of money turn deadly. The book opens with the gruesome story of Judas who, with the money he gains from betraying Jesus, buys a field only to dive headlong into the middle of it where he meets an untimely death. Then there is the story of Ananias and Saphira who sell their field and simultaneously manage to betray the Holy Spirit and the community of which they are a part, only to meet their deaths as well.

It's been noted that no one forces Barnabas or Ananias and Saphira to give up their land. There is no requirement, no rule forcing them to contribute. No one is voluntold to support the needy. Indeed, in this community there seems to be a very joyous spirit about giving. Those who can, or those who have, support those who lack. They do so willingly and with delight to be able to play the role of benefactor, not out of a desire to reap reward for themselves but in order to enjoy being a part of a thriving community and helping to fill it with love.

Here, then, we come to the contrast part. What actually separates the husband and wife team from Barnabas. Barnabas gives it all. They hold back. Barnabas gives it all. They hold back.

That holding back involves some premeditated deceit. You see, Ananias and Saphira pretend *not* to be holding back. They want everyone to think *they are all in*. That they are *totally* committed. That they are completely dedicated to this community of grace and the Savior they worship and serve. Except they are not.

The consequence of their deception warns us that “partial commitment” may be an oxymoron in the Christian life. There may not be a safe middle point between commitment to the saving grace of Christ, and no commitment at all. Someone once said that having a little bit of Christianity works like a vaccine. Going through the motions, just showing up now and then, trying to be a follower when it’s convenient but not at other times: this is like the administration of a small amount of dead virus. It inoculates you against getting the real thing.

Yet, it feels natural to limit our exposure. There are some strong cultural and social pressures that tell us to do that. Put the brakes on our own commitment, not release our grip on position or material wealth or anything we think we might need now or in the future more than the new life Christ offers us. The more we have, and the more we care about what we have, the harder it is to take our hand from that brake lever. After all, Jesus himself says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” And yet . . . and yet, there are those who learn to do it, and what an exciting ride they can take us on if we are willing to travel with them.

The week before last our church hosted a group of 30 college students who are riding across the country to raise money to help young adults in the battle against cancer. From Baltimore to Seattle. That’s their route. It took them three days riding to get here, only seventy days to go! The morning they left, they happened to zoom down my street. Peggy and I could hear them coming as they were yelling words of encouragement to one another. I imagine they do a lot of cheering for each other as they struggle through some steep terrain. As they dropped down the bike path that starts below Sunset Park, I heard one girl yell to her team, “Brakes are a waste!”

She didn’t want her fellow riders to slow down. Fly like the wind! Feel the rush of giving themselves completely to the energy which, in this case, gravity provides.

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Barnabas is that kind of rider. He sells a field and lays the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. He doesn't put the brakes on. He doesn't hold back. He releases what he has into the grateful arms of the community so that all within it will receive the provisions they need. He wants them to fly like the wind. Feel the rush of giving themselves to the energy which the Spirit supplies.

Barnabas has a big role in the life of the early church. Later, he takes Paul to Jerusalem following his conversion to introduce him to the disciples there. He goes to Antioch on a mission of evangelism and on several itinerant missionary journeys across the Mediterranean. Luke describes him as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Still, it's the nickname that really describes him. "Son of Encouragement." That is what it means. And how we all need encouragement.

Have you ever been part of a group that was just kind of blah? Low energy? Just kind of going through the motions. Not much fun is it?

But, even that kind of group can get fired up when an encourager arrives on the scene. They are pumped up, devoted to the purpose, ready to dive in. What a contrast!

There is always someone who needs encouragement. Someone who needs renewal. They may be sitting on the pew next to you! There is someone who needs to have their trust renewed in the goodness of God. That's a role for each of us to play, here in this place. It's a role for us together as a church to play in this community and beyond. To be encouragers for the kingdom. It's time to take our hands off the brakes. It's time to be all in for Jesus, because he is all in for us!

"Trouble Makers"

Sermon of the Reverend Dr. Dean Lindsey
Preached at
State College Presbyterian Church
June 24, 2018

Acts 6:27-32

The High Priest questioned them, saying, "Did we not give you strict orders not to teach in this name?"

Peter and the Apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

They are at it again, those trouble-makers. Peter and John, that is. They keep getting arrested, dragged before the authorities, and thrown in jail. In fact, when you include the stories of the Apostle Paul along with theirs, a good portion of the Book of Acts has to do with arrests, criminal trials, and imprisonment. One commentator describes the first of these episodes under the title "The Criminal Disciples Emerge."

"Criminal Disciples." That is *not* how we normally talk about these early, prominent followers of Jesus who do much to extend the reach of the gospel. We don't think of them as being complicit in some sort of nefarious enterprise, and yet that is exactly what the Jewish and Roman authorities believe. They break the law, even if at times the charges seem tenuous to us, and they are duly tried and convicted. Sometimes the authorities order their torture, but as soon as they are out of jail, these trouble makers are back at it again. Indeed at the conclusion of our story today, after they deliberate over what to do with their prisoners, the members of the religious council decide to release Peter and John, but not before they are scourged and beaten. "Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go."

However, Peter and John do not leave the place with their eyes downcast and their heads hanging low. In fact, they leave rejoicing. Rejoicing that "they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of Jesus' name."

Of course, Peter and John are neither the first nor the last people of faith who disobey the properly constituted authorities, civil or religious. However, it is Peter and other apostles with him who in today's passage give what is the most succinct Christian rationale for civil disobedience. It is their answer to the High Priest who has ordered them, yet again, to be quiet and not preach about Jesus. "We must obey God rather than any human authority," they say, or in a more contemporary voice, "We take our orders from God, not from the likes of you!"

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Those few words have both described and inspired a long line of trouble makers, rabble rousers, protesters, and outside agitators. Mike told the story this morning of Daniel in the Lion's Den. Daniel is not going to allow a royal decree, no matter how binding, to keep him from his prayers. Also in the Book of Daniel is the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, faithful Jewish men, who, for their troubles, are thrown into a fiery furnace, but there an angel protects them. Earlier in the Old Testament, there is the example of Shiphrah and Puah, Hebrew midwives in Egypt who defy the Pharaoh's order to murder infant Hebrew boys. John the Baptist criticizes the moral failings of King Herod and so ends up with his head on a platter. Stephen becomes the first martyr of the church, because he will not keep his mouth shut. James, the Apostle, becomes the second one at the hands of a new King Herod who sits in power.

The church has always taught that it is important for Christians to be good citizens . . . , but sometimes it becomes difficult to find the right . . . balance between our obedience to God and our obligations to the state.

In the Book of Revelation, these and a grand procession of martyrs stand before the throne of glory as honored participants in the pageantry of heaven and witnesses to God's final victory.

The list goes on through the history of the church, an unbroken line of principled defiance of authority and brave disobedience before unjust rulers. Martin Luther, whom we learned much about last Fall, on the 500th anniversary of his posting of the 95 theses, spends years on the run and under threat of death.

There is John Bunyan, the 17th century Puritan, non-conforming English preacher and author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, which is arguably the most

successful work of fiction ever produced. He composes it in prison where he is held for twelve years. English authorities offer to let him out sooner, under the condition that he stop preaching. Bunyan refuses, "I will stay in jail to the end of my days," he says, "before I make a mockery of my conscience."

French Huguenots, in the 16th and 17th century, are persecuted and hounded for their beliefs for decades and later live in a period of uneasy peace until King Louis XIV ends official recognition of Protestants. He unleashes the violent dragonnades, armed men, against them, forcing them to convert, leave the country, or face certain death. Louis Quatorze, le Roi-Soleil. You may remember his most famous quote from your history books, "L'etat, c'est moi." "The state, it's me." His admirers call him the Sun King, because he is so rich and so great. The obverse of coins struck during his reign bear his image along with an inscription of his name followed by two letters, D and G. D and G, abbreviations for the Latin *Dei Gratia*, "Grace of God."

King Louis, Grace of God. That's the claim that kings and emperors and despots and presidents-for-life always make for themselves (along with their courtiers and apologists) that they are God's grace, ordained to rule, due all of the respect and unquestioning obedience that divine appointment demands.

The church has always taught that it is important for Christians to be good citizens wherever we find ourselves, but sometimes it becomes difficult to find the right kind of connection and balance between our obedience to God and our obligations to the state, the emperor, or the authorities, however they are construed.

One contribution to this long running conversation is words written by the Apostle Paul in the 13th chapter of Romans, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." He goes on a few verses later to say, "Pay all that is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due . . ." Make sure to hold onto that thought when April 15 rolls around again!

Of course, we need to recognize the context of Paul's teaching. He's writing to the church at Rome at the very center of the empire. The Christian community there is small; its future uncertain. There and elsewhere, an intense, internecine conflict has been raging between Christians and their Jewish co-religionists. The church doesn't need to end up on the wrong side of the Romans, too. Paul doesn't want them to be tagged as seditionists. So he encourages the brothers and sisters in Rome to live peaceably among their neighbors, treating

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Paul's remarks in Romans 13 are the soul-filled advice of a man who has been both persecutor and persecuted and will spend a significant part of his life as a prisoner of conscience.

with respect even those who harass and persecute them. "Never avenge yourselves," he advises. Then after addressing the subject of rulers and authorities, he offers this summation, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

This is the context of Paul's remarks. They are the soul-filled advice of a man who has been both persecutor and persecuted and will spend a significant part of his life as a prisoner of conscience.

Sometimes Paul's letter to the Romans is invoked by a ruler or a representative of the state,¹ but how different it sounds coming from someone who holds power. Then, the words become a claim of divine sanction for their own mandates. To be sure, what a human authority declares to be good behavior, acceptable and legal sanctioned conduct, may or *may not be* in accord with the commands to love one another.

Simply put, we answer to a higher law than the law of the state. The Scots Confession of 1560, largely composed by John Knox, father of our Presbyterian tradition, puts it this way in a section entitled "The Works which are Counted Good before God." As followers of Christ, we are "To honor father, mother, princes, rulers, and superior powers; to love them, to support them, to obey their orders" with this important caveat (I continue quoting) "obey their orders if they are not contrary to the commands of God." 'If' is a very important word here. "If they are not contrary to the commands of God," and the confession continues from there with calls, "to save the lives of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed, to keep our bodies clean and holy, to live in soberness and temperance, to deal justly with all in word and deed."

The church has always known these things. We've always understood the higher obedience to which we are called, except in those fraught times when we've forgotten. On those occasions we bring great damage to the well-being of neighbors and the cause of faith. Still, such troubled times of reckless credulity and misplaced loyalty have also provided the moment for some of our greatest heroes to emerge and for some of our most profound theological realignments to occur.

The Reformers in Scotland react to the corruption of the established church and the push towards absolute monarchy in the 16th century. The Scots Confession which I just quoted is an important expression of their new movement and its aims. The Confessing Church in Germany in the 1930's stands against the absolutist claims of the Nazi state and the very idea of a German Christianity in its Theological Declaration of Barmen, also found in our *Book of Confessions*. It is a brave witness declaring the Lordship of Christ.

The newest addition to the Presbyterian Book of Confessions, formally adopted by our denomination in 2016 is called the Belhar Confession. The document originally was created in South Africa in the early 80's by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, a body made up of so-called "colored" people according to the racial designations of that time and place. Since the late 1940's the South African government had been administering and expanding a system of racial discrimination, called Apartheid, enforced by violence against non-white persons. It wasn't just a political and legal system. The white-only Dutch Reformed church also devised an elaborate theological rationale, supported by its own reading of Scripture, to justify and sustain

¹ For instance, the quote of Attorney General Jeff Sessions, defending the policy of separating children from their parents at the US border, "I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order." Also Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, "It is very Biblical to enforce the law."

this system. Among others, they eagerly invoked the words of Paul "Let all persons be subject to the governing authorities" and thus sought to provide theological cover for mistreating and imprisoning those who dared cross any number of arbitrarily drawn racial lines or those who protested against the system.

After decades of struggle, the work of the agitators, trouble makers, and rabble rousers, including church leaders such as Alan Boesak and Desmond Tutu, succeeded, and apartheid was ended in 1994. But, the Belhar Confession lives on because it continues to offer a compelling witness to the unity that is ours through Christ. It teaches that separation on the basis of race is a distortion of the gospel and that any system that steals and destroys lives while claiming to keep order is an affront to God. Within South Africa, the confession has been used as a guide and prompt in an ongoing movement towards unity and reconciliation between the white and black peoples and churches.

It's a long process, and a difficult one, to bring old enemies together. To break down barriers that never should have been erected, to reach out to the least and the lost. Whenever that happens, we are sure to find the witness of stubborn and committed trouble makers who begin the work and see it through. So, we thank God for those trouble makers, and for the most important trouble-maker of them all. I can't forget to mention his name. Jesus, don't you know? Yes, he is a trouble maker who keeps on preaching, refuses to stop saying and showing that God loves every one. No one can stop his witness, not even those who conspire to put him on the cross.

Jesus creates a lot of trouble on our behalf.

Sometimes, we are called to cause some trouble on his.

It's a long process, and a difficult one, to bring old enemies together. To break down barriers that never should have been erected, to reach out to the least and the lost. Whenever that happens, we are sure to find the witness of stubborn and committed trouble makers who begin the work and see it through.

"The Conversion of Stephen"

Sermon of the Reverend Dean Lindsey
State College Presbyterian Church
July 1, 2018

Acts 6:8-7:2a; 7:52-8:1a

As far as sermons and speeches go in the book of Acts, this one is a doozie. Already in the book, we've read about several extraordinary preaching events. Peter's sermon on Pentecost is the first extensive speech recorded in Acts. It generates some controversy, but it also results in the conversion and baptism of 3000 persons on a single day. Not long after that, following the healing of a crippled man at the Temple gate, Peter again begins to preach. Some folks get mad, but 5000 become believers that day. Then we come to Stephen's speech. It's the longest one in the book of Acts, but no one is converted. No one becomes convinced of the truth of the gospel. Anger is the only response. And murder. One person dies. The preacher himself, as it turns out. I'm just thankful that I've never had that kind of reaction to one of my sermons.

So, who is this man Stephen and what are we to make of his life and witness? We know that he is a Greek-speaking Jewish believer who has become a part of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. He rises to prominence at one of the first moments of crisis in the early church. The Greek speakers in the community feel that their widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Sounding a bit uncharitable, the Twelve Disciples, leaders of the community, express the feeling that they have more important things to attend to than "waiting on tables," and so seven other men are appointed to this work, including Stephen who is described as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit." No doubt, Stephen fulfills his duties in that 1st century meals-on-wheels program, but he also becomes known for the "signs and wonders" he performs among the people. Assumedly, that is enough to place him in the crosshairs of other Jerusalemites who, from jealousy or misunderstanding or animosity towards the new faith in Christ, bring false charges against Stephen and haul him before the temple authorities.

Stephen's speech, then, is an answer to the accusation that he has slandered Moses and God. "Are these things so?" the Chief Priest demands to know, and so Stephen launches into a long defense. Only, he's not really playing defense. He's strictly on offense, laying out his own charge: they have not been true to the traditions of Israel and the worship of God. They may be devoted to the worship of the temple, but it is only a human-made structure not necessary for ensuring God's presence. They have not honored God's Spirit; they are part of a long line of stiff-necked people who have rejected God's servants and prophets. Stephen's

Stephen's concluding words are filled with insults and bitterness . . . So, it is no surprise that the authorities fly into a rage rather than accept his testimony, much less, turn to Christ.

concluding words are filled with insults and bitterness. He calls them betrayers and murderers who received the Law but have not themselves kept it.

We can understand where Stephen is coming from. These are members of the religious council and part of the very group that conspired with the Roman authorities to send Jesus to the cross. It's true that Stephen doesn't actually name Jesus, but his indictment is clear. They are responsible.

During his speech Stephen was ready to match insult with insult. Accusation with accusation. Curse with curse. Now, he will pray a second time much as Jesus prayed from the cross, asking that his killers be forgiven. The final words he utters are "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

So, it is no surprise that the authorities fly into a rage rather than accept his testimony, much less, turn to Christ.

But, there is more to this drama, and we need to pay attention to the details of what happens next. Stephen looks into heaven and sees an amazing vision, of the glory of God with Jesus standing at his right hand. It is an assurance that God is near, watching over his people and that Jesus, exalted and victorious, reigns with him. This is precisely the vision that Luke, the author of Acts, wants his readers, wants us, to see and understand, as well. That Jesus, having suffered death and been resurrected now reigns with God. The meaning of this vision forms the fundamental confession of the church and of all Christians: "Jesus is Lord."

That is why we are here right now. That is why we baptized little Timothy this morning. That is why we pray and sing. That is why we serve God and proclaim God's goodness. We are the people who with Stephen and the apostles and the early church and with all of that great procession of saints between them and us say with one voice "Jesus is Lord."

Under threat of death and in the presence of an angry, murderous mob, this is what comes into focus for Stephen. It is a vision he has longed to see. It is a vision that the religious council cannot see, does not want to see, refuses even to listen to Stephen's description of it. So the stones begin to fly. Rocks, of increasing size, thrown against his body with greater force and in larger numbers. Each one inflicting injury until the cumulative blows bow him towards the ground. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." The vision

This is a sign that Stephen's conversion and his commitment to the gospel is complete. He embodies in his own words and actions the person of Christ. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

speaks through him, its meaning crystal clear. "Lord Jesus," he prays. Jesus is Lord.

For Stephen, that makes all the difference. Before, during his speech he was ready to match insult with insult. Accusation with accusation. Curse with curse. Now, he will pray a second time much as Jesus prayed from the cross, asking that his killers be forgiven. The final words he utters are "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Recently, I came across a piece by Baylor theologian Natalie Carnes and a quote that really struck me. She writes, "We receive the divine by serving those who bear no obvious trace of divine glory." It would be normal and appropriate for us to think of the poor, the dispossessed, and the sick, when we hear words such as these. However, they could also apply to the lynch mob standing over Stephen. They believe they are carrying out God's will, but from our perspective there is no trace of divine glory in what they seek to do. And yet, Stephen serves them by praying for them. He lifts up their greatest need in that very moment, their need for forgiveness, before God.

This is a sign that Stephen's conversion and his commitment to the gospel is complete. He embodies in his own words and actions the person of Christ. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." That's what Jesus teaches. It's what Stephen does in an extraordinary plea, not for the destruction of his enemies but for their very salvation through God's mercy.

The vision of Christ leads to forgiveness. It creates a generous spirit. It guides us to love, even the most difficult of all loves, the love of an enemy. "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" Jesus asks, "Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"

It is likely that the outcome of Stephen's confrontation with the Jerusalem council is unavoidable. The crowd is already against him and primed for confrontation. The temple authorities are already on edge. The fuel for rage is stacked and ready. All that is needed is a match. Stephen supplies the match.

We cannot rewrite his story, but it is worth considering how we want to write our own. In these days of conflict, and quick tempers, and ready resort to reprisal. Will we meet threat with threat? Accusation with accusation? Curse with curse? Or, will we try something new? After all, Jesus says, "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him lest you be handed over to the judge and then to the guard who will throw you in prison." Or worse.

Coming in November, a scientist named Katharine Hayhoe will be visiting Penn State. I hope to get to see her, because I've read some of her articles and seen her Youtube presentation. In fact, a number of us saw it together in Adult Education over a year ago, because Katharine is a Christian (daughter of missionaries and wife of a pastor, she identifies herself as an evangelical Christian) and she is a climate researcher at Texas Tech University. That places her in the middle of a lot of controversy these days.

On a daily basis, she receives hate-filled messages on Twitter, Facebook, email, and handwritten letters, as well. They call her stupid or corrupt or evil, and sometimes threaten her. She says, "I get these messages because I'm stating the truth about what is happening to our (world)." How does she answer her enemies?

Anyone can be touched by his grace, and anyone can be forgiven.

It is something she works very hard to do. She describes a recent talk she gave in San Antonio for a large gathering of Texas officials, including elected or politically appointed officials, involved in water resource issues. Let's be clear, she was not talking to the Sierra Club.

She started with water, how there is never enough unless there is too much. She talked about rising temperatures in the state, and how rainfall is becoming more erratic. She showed charts predicting drier and hotter summers as the world continues to warm and then focused on things we can do to make smarter choices, plan ahead, and prepare for a water-scarce future. She never said the words "climate" and "change" in the same sentence, even though that's what the whole talk was about.

Tricky of her, right? Well, she knew her audience, and, perhaps she turned a few people off, but she writes, "The event went well. No one interrupted; everyone clapped at the end — even enthusiastically. Afterward, quite a few people wanted to chat with me. First in line was an animated woman who shook my hand saying, "You know those people who are always talking about global warming? I don't agree with them at all. But this? This makes sense."

Though I think it's a goal most of us share, I do not know exactly how we achieve kindness and mutual respect in our community and national life. However, I know we don't get there with bitterness and reprisals and constant one-upmanship. This does not mean backing down from the truth but involves the very difficult work of discovering how our truth might connect with another person's truth, how our value and values are linked to the values and the value of the other.

For us, that begins with a vision of the exalted Christ, who reigns over and cares for us all, so much so that we know that anyone can be touched by his grace, and anyone can be forgiven. We may vehemently disagree with another person. We may find their words and actions contemptible, and likely they are, but what we know through Christ is that they deserve to be loved; indeed they are loved by God.

That is what Stephen discovers, even about his vile persecutors. Tragically, Stephen's vision comes late. My prayer is that it's not too late for us.

"At the Gate"

Sermon of the Reverend Dean Lindsey

Preached at

State College Presbyterian Church

July 22, 2018

The Apostle Peter is about to be killed. That's how our story opens today. It's a detail that's easy to miss when we read, "The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch." This is some serious security. Four armed soldiers, shackles on the prisoners arms and wrists, locked prison gates, all for a man who has been preaching and healing. That shows how ruthless an autocrats can be, and the systems and people which support them can become, because underneath it all, such leaders are always deeply fearful and insecure. They will go to any length to silence the truth. They cannot bear it.

Peter is done for. Herod is going to bring Peter out to end him.

Herod Agrippa, is the grandson of another cruel King Herod, the one from whom Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus are forced to flee. This King Herod has already ordered the execution of James, the Apostle. Killed with the sword. Peter is next. So, when the text says, "the night before Herod was going to bring him out," we as readers need to understand what that means. Peter is done for. Herod is going to bring Peter out to end him.

In the meantime, the church is doing what the church always does, and should always do. The church is praying. Praying fervently to God for him. We can imagine those prayers. Desperately pleading. Begging. Maybe even bargaining. "God, if you'll just release our friend and brother Peter, we'll be more faithful, more obedient, more kind and loving."

We've all made those kinds of prayers. Some of us more than others. The anguished prayer on a sleepless night when there is no one else to talk to, no one else to lean upon, no one else who *can* help, other than God.

Sometimes, the worst happens despite our prayers. Stunned and grief-filled, we may demand to know "Why? Why has this trouble come to me?" We may lash out at God., "Why did you do this to me?" Then, at some further moment, we may meekly ask, "God, you know what I've lost. You know what misery has come upon me. Help me bear it. Help me bear this pain."

Perhaps, that kind of prayer is already upon the lips of the beleaguered group gathered in the Jerusalem home of a woman named Mary, also identified as the mother of John Mark. Are they still praying, "God, please see to it that Peter can be released?" Or, has the hopelessness of it all begun to sink in? Have begun instead to pray, "Peter is done for, God, help us avoid the same fate?"

They don't know it just then, but the church's first petition has already been answered. As they pray, Peter is on his way to rejoin them. Step by step, the angel moves him along. The chains drop away. "Fasten your belt, put on your sandals, wrap your cloak around you," the angel says. It seems like a trivial detail, but it's just a reminder of how Peter's identity has been stripped bare. A prisoner's body is not his or her own. Putting on the clothing means that Peter's identity is being restored; the prison gate swings open, and he steps towards freedom.

But, the next gate he'll encounter remains locked and closed, and this brings us to such an interesting part of the story. Plenty of irony here, and humor, too.

Sometimes we forget to laugh when we are reading Scripture. This story is funny, and we need to laugh, but we also need to make sure we are laughing at the right part. Not at the slave girl Rhoda. She's gets laughed at enough. Silly girl, "you're out of your mind, out of control," the church members tease. Rhoda's the one who's heard the knock at the gate and the voice of Peter. Filled with joy, she forgets to do the obvious thing and let him come in, but she can't wait to share this joy with everyone else.

They mock her, saying, "Must be his angel," though she insists that Peter himself has arrived. The question that needs to be asked is, "Why would an angel knock at the gate, and not just come inside?" Even if it is an angel, why not go and answer the door? Somehow, that doesn't occur to them.

You see, they want us to join in laughing at the expense of this young woman. Too often that is how humor is designed. It trades on stereotypes to make us laugh at the lowest status person in the story or the skit or the comic set-up. Think back to those vaudeville routines with actors in black face. Or the way that Asian men and women used to be depicted in films, and sometimes still are. As a native of the deep South, I often cringe when stereotypical Southern characters show up on T.V. They open wide their eyes or puff out their cheeks to signal how silly or high strung or mistake prone they must be, these excitable and emotion-driven servants or hired hands or kitchen help, so unlike the higher status "reasonable" actors.

Rhoda is not playing the fool. She is doing nothing less than proclaiming what is true, what is real, what is important, and continuing to proclaim this news despite the refusal of others to listen.

Here we find a familiar pattern. A woman, bearing the truth, is dismissed and ignored.

But, that is not what is going on here in Luke's account. Rhoda is not playing the fool. She is doing nothing less than proclaiming what is true, what is real, what is important, and continuing to proclaim this news despite the refusal of others to listen.

Here we find a familiar pattern. A woman, bearing the truth, is dismissed and ignored.

After all, that's what happens on Easter itself as women return from the empty tomb of Jesus with an urgent report. Luke gives us three names --Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, the mother of James—and there are other women with them, as well. They describe what they've found, rather what they've failed to find: there is no body in the tomb. The women tell of the terrifying appearance of two men, clothed in dazzling white who remind them of Jesus' promise that he "must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

That is the breathless report the women bring to the disciples. But their telling elicits no shouts of "Alleluia." No hands raised in celebration. No tears of joy. Luke says, "These words seemed to them (meaning the men) an idle tale, foolishness, and they did not believe them."

Even earlier, Peter himself has done his best to dismiss the words of a servant girl. You remember this story. Jesus has been arrested and dragged to the house of the high priest. The other disciples have scattered into the night, but Peter lingers behind and waits in the courtyard, hoping to catch a glimpse of what is happening inside. "A servant girl, seeing him in the firelight, stares at him and says, 'This man was also with him.' But Peter denies it, saying 'Woman, I do not know him.'"

"I do not know him."

These stories provide such a brutally honest look at these early leaders of the church. The unvarnished truth about their foibles and failures, their blind spots and bad judgment. When they start to take themselves too seriously, they find out they are seriously mistaken. When they think they've got everything figured out, they discover they know nothing at all.

There in Mary's house in Jerusalem, the church is so concentrated on its prayers that those gathered lose track of what's actually happening in the world. As a scholar named Kathy Chambers has written, "They would rather believe that Peter is dead and so in the inefficacy of their prayer than heed the words of a female slave!"

You see, the joke, it's on them.

Those who have been set free, will they find a place (in the church) where they can share their stories, or will they be forced to go somewhere else?

What an odd situation we find. Peter, knocking and knocking and knocking at the outer gate, finds it is easier to escape from a high security prison than it is to join the church at prayer.

This is a story that has a lot to teach us. About doors that open and doors that stay closed. About the church, when we are so focused on our own murmurings that we can't see the miracles God is making happen. And about those who have been set free. Will they find a place here where they can share their stories, or will they be forced to go somewhere else?

In a former church I served, there was a member I was getting to know. He seemed really weighed down by worries that he never confided in me, and then he just kind of disappeared. I didn't know what happened to him until a couple of years later. It turns out he had been convicted of tax fraud and had spent that time in prison. I next saw him in the narthex of the church at the end of a service. He was dashing out the door. In the coming weeks, I would find him there standing or seated. Why don't you come inside the sanctuary and join us for the service?

"I can't go inside the sanctuary. I can't bear to sit there with everyone else." He wanted desperately to be a part, but he could not find the way in.

We Presbyterians tend to be a pretty socially-respectable bunch of folk. We know how to polish our shoes before we come to church. We know how to look good on the outside, even if we've been struggling on the inside. But the prisoner who's been released, or the sick person who's been healed, or the addict who's in recovery? They may not remember how to put polish on their shoes. They may be wearing the signs of struggle on the outside and aren't able or interested in keeping it all inside. But, when they come knocking, we need to hear it. When they come calling we need to listen. When they find the door closed, we need to open it wide for them. Then, we'll see miracles, too.

Peter keeps knocking, and finally someone decides that what Rhoda has been telling them isn't so crazy after all. They go to the gate, and there is Peter, standing before them just as the servant has tried to make clear. Listen to this line, "When they opened the gate, they saw

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him and were amazed.” This word ‘amazed’ or ‘astonished’ in our English versions is a bit stronger in Greek. *εξίστημι*, can mean to be beside oneself, to lose mental or spiritual balance. In other words, they kind of go crazy. Just what they had said about Rhoda. Only, she is the sanest one in the group.

In the end, Peter doesn’t stay. He tells them what has happened, but he doesn’t even come inside. After that, maybe they’ll learn to leave the door open. Even when they are praying. Especially then.

Let us pray. Lord, as we pray, help us to keep open the doors of our hearts. As we worship, help us keep open the doors of understanding. As we study, help us to keep open the doors of knowledge. As we work, help us to keep open the doors of compassion, that we might see and join in the miraculous work you are doing in Christ. Amen.

the world and everything in it; he who is Lord of heaven and earth . . . he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.”

One God who is above economic life. Social life. Entertainment. Political life. Family life. Church life. Yes, that must be included, too, because even church can become an idol if we treat it that way.

The struggle against idolatry has always been a major concern of our Reformed tradition. The heart of our faith is the affirmation of “the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love.” I’m quoting now from our Presbyterian Book of Order. “Related to the central affirmation of God’s sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

1. The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;
2. Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God;
3. A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation;
4. The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.”

The reason that we care about idolatry is not so that we can protect our God from some pantheon of lesser gods. We do so, so that people and communities can thrive, because we are certain that anything less than an attachment to the one, true God leads only to injustice and brokenness of community and on an individual level a lack of true satisfaction and meaningful purpose in life.

There is a thirst within us that longs to be quenched but never is until we find God. Many more centuries ago, Augustine confessed in prayer, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

Paul lays this all out for his audience at the Areopagus in Athens. It’s a place for learning. For debate. For discovering new ideas. Hearing the ideas the Paul offers, some want to hear more, many others scoff, and a few become believers. They are fortunate ones, on the way to wholeness. No longer scattered in their lives, chasing after gods who will never respond to them, never listen to them, never love them. They will find rest in God. My prayer is that we all will find that same rest in the One who has always loved us, and always will.

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Imagine, if you will, the gods of commerce. Are there such things? It is certainly the case that in our economic system that if you run a business, you need to make a profit. If you don't make a profit, you won't stay in business very long. But, making a profit can become a singular and all-consuming goal. All other aspects of the business may be subsumed beneath this objective; quality, fair treatment of employees, environmental concerns all may take a back seat. Profit itself, then, becomes a god, created by human intention and desire. It is, in other words, an idol to be worshipped and served.

In a university community, we are certainly aware of the drive for academic success whether that is grades for the students or productive research on the part of graduate students and faculty. These things are important. But, again, we know of the kinds of ethical shortcuts—anything from plagiarism to fudging data--which may be attempted when success itself becomes the god.

There are other gods we create, many of which emerge from what are positive instincts. In our country, we form political parties in order to advocate for particular policies and to uphold the interests of people and issues we care about. However, parties can become idols, too, when victory for the party crowds out all other concerns. Then, democracy suffers as well as the shared life of the nation.

Here is the thing about these many gods. You can love them, but they will never love you back. You can love profit, but it won't love you. You can love success, and it will bring rewards, but it is a fickle god. Here today. Gone tomorrow.

In our own day and age, we're not likely to carve images, place them on the mantelpiece and genuflect before them, but there are so many things that distract us from God and keep us from our best self, the lesser gods that we place beside or before the true God. The ideals or ideology we hold to tightly. The stuff that we can't bear to live without. The commitment to team or party or even nation we treat with religious fervor.

In the ten commandments, we find explicit mention of these things in the first two commandments "You shall have no other gods before me. That is number 1, and number 2 is "You shall not make for yourself an idol." Don't put any stuff on a level with God. Don't attach yourself to anything with the same strength or commitment with which you attach yourself to God. In other words, there is only one God deserving of worship. One God to serve. One God to fear. Paul sums up the nature of this one God as he describes "The God who made

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one god but not to the exclusion of other gods. Or, we could call them polytheists, that is, people who worship a plurality of gods.

Many centuries later, the Apostle Paul encounters a similar landscape as he wanders around the city of Athens. The text informs us that Paul “was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” One thing that he discovers is an altar “to an unknown God.” It’s a curious thing, no doubt. Who would go to the trouble of creating a place of worship to a God who cannot be named and who is not even known? We can imagine a contemporary asking its creator why he or she is doing such a thing and then nodding in agreement when it’s explained that it never hurts to add another god. What possible harm could come of it? Like the colonists in a defeated Israel long before, the Athenians too are trying to cover their bets. Make space for every possible god, and just in case one has been left out include one more altar for the unknown god.

(W)e go into the workplace. Or to school. Or to a sporting event. Or, in our own day, we go on line. And we operate under a different set of creeds, perform different liturgies, and adhere to a different ethic.

As Christians in the modern, developed world, we tend to think of polytheism or syncretism as symptoms typical of a much more primitive time or place. In the last century, Canon Max Warren, a British ecumenist and mission historian took aim at this sort of smug self-assurance. At the time, African Christians were receiving what he felt was gratuitous criticism for seeking to contextualize the faith, doing things such as bringing traditional dance and song into worship or continuing cultural practices to honor ancestors. It’s not a creeping syncretism in Africa we should worry about, he declared, but a “drift back into the old polytheism” in Western Secular culture (those are his words).

The essence of paganism, he explains, is that it divides the various concerns of life into sections. There is one god of the soil. There is another god of the desert. The god of wisdom is different from the god of wine.

There is a god for marriage, and a god for war. Webber writes, “All this is precisely where the modern paganism of our secular society has brought us today. Certain portions of our life we call religious . . . we use special language,” we do certain things. That is our Christianity. “Then we turn to another part of life called politics. Now we think (and act) in quite different” ways. Or we go into the workplace. Or to school. Or to a sporting event. Or, in our own day (not his), we go on line. And we operate under a different set of creeds, perform different liturgies, and adhere to a different ethic.

This seems like a rather severe indictment, but, in truth, we may really have more in common with the ancient Athenians than we care to admit.

"I See How Religious You Are"
Sermon of the Reverend Dean Lindsey
State College Presbyterian Church
July 29, 2018

II Kings 17:24-34
Acts 17:16-34

Some church members, when they are thinking about volunteering to be our Sunday liturgist, worry about what passage will be assigned to them. Will it have some impossible to pronounce words in it? Will they be able to get through it without making a mistake. I usually tell them, "Don't worry. I won't give you a reading with a lot of hard words in it."

This week, I sent a message to Sharon Manno. "You'd better worry." But she did a great job, did she not? It's an obscure passage tucked away here in the stories of II Kings. Obscure place names (at least to us)—Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim--along with the deities of those places—Succoth-benoth, Negral, Ashima, Nibhaz, Tartak. That's the reason for the reading, to illustrate how gods are understood by many cultures in the ancient world. A change of place means a change of gods. What's reported in II Kings is the aftermath of the defeat of the Northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the powerful Assyrian army. The conquerors move in and displace many of the native people, replacing them with other subject populations. It's similar to what happened as the American frontiers expanded. The Cherokee or Catawba or Sioux tribes were displaced and the Scotch Irish or the Germans or the Swedes took their place. Different people, with different languages and cultures, worshipping different gods.

When the new settlers arrive in Israel, they find that the area is crawling with lions. They figure the god of this land must be displeased and so ask the King of Assyria to send a priest of Yahweh back from exile to teach them how they should worship the Lord.

The text continues, "But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places." This is where we find the tongue twister of a list that Sharon had to read, followed by this conclusion, "So they worshipped the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away."

**Make space
for every
possible
god . . .
just in case**

It's clear they want to have it both ways. They are covering all their bets. If Yahweh is the God of this territory, they will do their best to appease him, observe his rituals, keep up his holy shrines, and support his priest. But, they are still going to hold onto their old gods . . . just in case.

We could call these folks syncretists, that is people who combine together the practices and beliefs of different religions. We could call them henotheists, that is, people who believe in

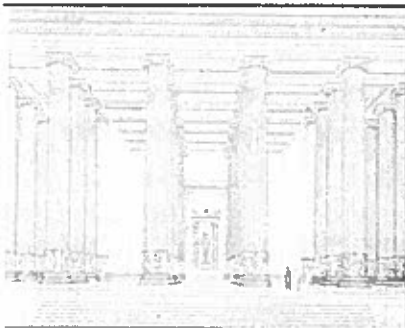
“Disrupting Business”

Sermon of the Reverend Dean Lindsey
State College Presbyterian Church
August 5, 2018

Acts 19:23-41

A dangerous situation is unfolding in the narrative I’ve just read to you from the Book of Acts. Don’t worry if you didn’t catch some of the details. This is not a story most church-goers are familiar with, so I’m going to tell you a little more about the setting and replay the action for you. It takes place in Ephesus, a coastal city in the Roman province of Asia, not to be confused with the continent of Asia; this is a region in Eastern Turkey in our day, right on the Aegean Sea.

The Apostle Paul has been in Ephesus for over two years, giving speeches, preaching sermons, and talking about the kingdom of God to any who will listen. Many—both Jews and pagans--have become believers, joining “the Way,” which is the earliest name for the Christian movement.



Ephesus is not some insignificant backcountry village; it is a major center of banking and trade and ranks as one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. What it’s best known for, however, is the glorious temple of the goddess Artemis. It is a massive structure, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world with over 100,000 sq. feet of floor space and columns with elaborately carved bases soaring 65 feet in height.

In the center of the temple is a statue of Artemis, perhaps the most popular member of the Greco/Roman pantheon. In Greek mythology, she is variously depicted as a virgin hunter or protector of children or the goddess of fertility. That’s what you see in the picture before you: Artemis with multiple breasts. It’s hard for us moderns to imagine, but it is absolutely the case that she inspires followers throughout the Hellenistic world who come to this place as pilgrims, seeking her blessing. So many, in fact, that Ephesus is the number one tourist destination in the Roman Empire.



Now, I’m sure most all of you here have been to a real tourist spot. Niagara Falls, or Washington, DC, or Philadelphia. What do you always find at a tourist destination?

Junk shops. Souvenir stands, hawking all kinds of trinkets, replicas of the Liberty Bell or the Washington monument or whatever it is that people come to see, and they want to take a bit of it home with them. Nowadays these tchotchkes are usually made out of plastic, but way back in the day, they’re made of wood or carved stone or, for those tourists who have just a

little more to spend, silver is the top choice. They may be expensive, but shiny souvenir replicas of the goddess and her temple are in high demand in Ephesus.

One of the big players in this robust tourist trade is a man named Demetrius. He has been listening to the preaching of Paul with some apprehension. Demetrius understands the message: “gods made with human hands are not gods.” The more people believe that, the worse it’s going to be for devotion to Artemis, and the worse will be for the souvenir business. Indeed, he claims that Paul has already “persuaded and drawn away a number of people.”

If you ever want to create some deep, down in the bones kind of hatred and incite some mob-fueled violence, all you really need to do is tell a group of people that someone, some enemy, is going to take their jobs away.

We don’t know exactly what sets Demetrius off on this particular day. Maybe he’s just the kind of guy who nurses a grudge. He’s loud. Something’s always bothering him, and he’s found that he can stir those around him with his anger. Demetrius is out to convince the members of the silver guild that they are under threat.

The silversmiths may sense already that change is in the wind. Demetrius knows his audience. He knows they don’t like change. He knows they’re not interested in adapting to change. Demetrius knows that with the right goading, they will do whatever they can to make sure this change never comes.

At the end of his speech, they pour into the street screaming. “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” When they assemble in the stadium, the noise becomes

deafening. “Great is Artemis, god of the Ephesians.” It’s the local cheer for their goddess. Rhythmically formulated. Highly ritualized. Repeated over and over again. “Great is Artemis, god of the Ephesians.” It signals approval and praise for their place, their people, their god. It signals disapproval and deprecation of any other. The chant is designed to bind together the in group and intimidate the out group.

You know what I’m talking about here, don’t you? Imagine, if you will, a stadium filled with thousands of people all screaming a rhythmic chant at the top of their lungs. “It’s great to be a Michigan Wolverine.” The people who are screaming that chant are not doing it in order to welcome a few Penn State fans into their nice little town of Ann Arbor. They are doing it to say, “You’re on our turf, and we don’t like you, and we are going to defeat you!”

So, that’s what’s going on in Ephesus. A couple of Paul’s companions get dragged to the amphitheater. Paul wants to join them there, but other friends and even sympathetic town officials, hold him back, “Are you crazy, Paul?” “You can’t go there.”

The Great Theatre of Ephesus is a large gathering place; it seats 25,000 (that’s what modern archeologists have determined). We don’t know how many show up that day. Could

be more. They are not sitting passively. They are not there to watch a play. This is a mob. Most of the people don't even know why they've come. "Some are shouting one thing. Some another." A hapless Jewish man named Alexander pleads with the crowd. He's wants to protect the synagogue; he's trying to clarify that Paul does not speak for the Jews. The crowd shouts him down. That is not what they want to hear. And for the next two hours. Two long hours, the air is filled only with the noise of the chanting crowd. "Great is Artemis, god of the Ephesians," over and over again.

Not many people can avoid being anything other than rage-filled when confronted with inexorable and unwelcome change, when forced to reckon with their vulnerability before forces over which they have no control.

If you ever want to create some deep, down in the bones kind of hatred and incite some mob-fueled violence, all you really need to do is tell a group of people that someone, some enemy, is going to take their jobs away.

Demetrius knows how to serve up a potent cocktail, one part hatred, two parts fear. If you want people to drink this dangerous elixir, just suggest that these enemies are going to mess up the economy, disrupt their way of life, threaten their religion.

Not many people can resist a message like that. Not many people can avoid being anything other than rage-filled when confronted with inexorable and unwelcome change, when forced to reckon with their vulnerability before forces over which they have no control. Especially. Especially when they thought that they had a lot of control.

There is fear and desperation behind those shouts of "Great is Artemis," a desire to retain control, to put things back the way they were before.

They've got anger. They've got fear, but what this crowd lacks is faith. How true is the lesson that teaches "fear is the enemy of faith."

When the disciples are caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee and desperately worried, Jesus says to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" He then rebukes the wind and the sea is calmed. Faith, you see, is the solution to fear.

We read in 2nd Timothy, "For God did not give us a spirit of fear and cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-control." Then, in 1st John we read, "Perfect love casts out fear."

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It is the perfect love of God, inhabiting our hearts, filling our minds, and directing our very selves which allows us to move through life not with resentment but with grace, not with fear but with trust that God will see us through, no matter what happens. We are taught to remember the words of the Psalmist (Psalm 46), "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea."

Faith prepares us for change, helps us to welcome the newness it brings, or to weather the challenges it presents. "Do not fear." "Do not be afraid." It's is a constant refrain all through Scripture. Economic change. Political change. Social change. We do not fear these things, because they do not threaten us. Oh yes, faithful people may not have the same economic status. Our social standing may be diminished. We may have to inhabit a different place in the world. But, the place that truly matters will never be taken by someone else. It cannot be, because we are God's own. We are in God's hands. That is faith, knowing that we belong to him; our very purpose is found in him; and there is no force that can ever take us away from God.

Unlike a crowd, a congregation is where there is acclamation without deprecation, celebration without exclusion, a community that shares joy, never envy or resentment.

That means people of faith can never join themselves to an angry mob. But, they can (and we do) join a congregation. . . to bind ourselves with those who have found the narrow way to life. Unlike a crowd, a congregation is where there is acclamation without deprecation, celebration without exclusion, a community that shares joy, never envy or resentment.

In the end, the crowd in Ephesus dissipates. No one is hurt. Everyone returns to their homes. Unlike other moments of resolution in the Book of Acts, no miracle is recorded. No earthquake. No bolt of lightning from heaven sends everyone scurrying away.

A bureaucrat saves the day. The town clerk reminds them that no crime has been committed. And if there is a complaint to make against some person or group, there are procedures in place, a proper, legal way to settle the dispute.

And, perhaps, that in itself is the miracle, and one we should not miss. The miracle of having respect for the kinds of laws that not only protect the weak or the accused but also the kinds of laws that protect the strongest group from its own worst instincts and its most dreadful self.

That is something we all need, and we all ought to pray for, regularly, in our lives, in our community, and in our nation.