

“ALL THE USUAL SUSPECTS”

[A sermon by the Rev. Dr. George Gray Toole]

Texts: Isaiah 43:8-13 and Acts 17:1-9

St. Andrew’s Christian Community, August 19, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

I was sitting on the “settee” (couch) in my cousin’s living room in Paisley, Scotland watching the news on ITC (the non-governmental television channel). The “newsreader” (anchorman) was reporting on the capture of a thief. He said,

“HE WAS IDENTIFIED FROM AN IDENTITY PARADE.”

It broke me up! On the screen there was what we would call a “police line up”. I couldn’t contain my laughter. My cousins looked at their weird American cousin and wondered why I would be laughing at such a serious matter.

But for this American an “identity parade” conjured up suspects sashaying past to the accompaniment of beauty pageant music. [“A Pretty Girl Is Like A Melody”.]

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Those of us who are fans of “Law And Order” know that when a particular crime occurs the first thought of the police is to

“ROUND UP ALL THE USUAL SUSPECTS”.

That is all those who have been involved in similar crimes in the past.

Jason ended up in the “identity parade” at the Thessalonica police station. What events had led to his being picked up?

Paul had made his way there from Amphipolis and Apollonius.

Luke, the author of Acts as well as his Gospel, is reminding us of the distances Paul and his companions typically walked as they spread the Gospel. We are talking about a 100 mile trip.

At any rate, the charges were brought against Jason. The charges were:

1) disturbing the peace and 2) treason.

What had he done?

He had permitted Paul and his companions to stay at his home during their visit.

SO?

The Jews were upset with what Paul was teaching, and being influential with the city authorities, the Jews brought them before the local magistrate.

What had upset them?

- 1) They disagreed with what Paul taught, namely that Jesus was the promised Messiah, even though He had died the disgraceful death on the cross and had been raised from the dead by God.
- 2) They were miffed that a number of their synagogue members had been converted by Paul. Moreover, they were embarrassed by the fact that even some of the Gentiles (the God-fearers), who attended synagogue regularly but hadn't become Jews, had been convinced by Paul.

In addition, not a few of their women also believed what Paul taught and decided to become followers of this Christ (Messiah), causing discord both in the synagogue and their families.

In short, they were both jealous and envious of Paul's effectiveness.

Their actual complaint was,

**“THESE MEN
WHO HAVE TURNED THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN
HAVE COME HERE ALSO . . .”.**

They had heard reports from other towns, and had dreaded the day when Paul would show up in their synagogue.

And Paul not only showed up, but he spent three Sabbaths discussing and teaching them about Jesus Christ, drawing from the Scriptures they all knew and loved. (We call them “the Old Testament”).

By the way, the synagogue served two purposes:

- 1) it was a place of Sabbath worship, and
- 2) it was a place of the Sabbath school, which often lasted for hours.

However, they knew that the Roman court would not be interested in an internal affair of the synagogue, so they brought the charge of treason, which was always guaranteed to get the magistrates' attention. Rome would tolerate many things, but it would never tolerate treason.

**“...THEY ARE ALL ACTING
AGAINST THE DECREES OF CAESAR.
SAYING THAT THERE IS
'ANOTHER KING, JESUS'.”**

The magistrates knew that would bring Rome's wrath down upon their city, a city which enjoyed unusual freedom in the Empire. It would spoil everything!

But, what was the basis for the charge and who would appear to make the charge? Men were hired/bribed to come to court and to attest to the truth of the charges.

Where were such men to be found? The answer is found in the colorful word used in the New Testament Greek. The market place was where folks gathered to do business, to socialize, and to spend their time.

There the perfect men were found. The Greek literally calls them “market loafers”. You know the kind of men Luke is describing. Every town and city has them.

But wait a minute! If they are upset with Paul, how come it’s Jason and some of the other local believers who are dragged into court with much shouting and commotion?

The answer is: During the previous night, Paul and his companions skipped town, sensing what was brewing. You see, it had all happened in other towns.

Now, having shaken up Jason and the other believers, they made them post bail and told them not to disturb the peace or engage in treason again.

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UPSIDE DOWN!

THIS IS THE CHARGE BROUGHT AGAINST CHRISTIANS THROUGHOUT HISTORY.

Just as Paul and Silas were sharing and living the greatest treasure the world has ever known, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so we are called to do the very same thing.

Therefore, the real and urgent question before us is:

**CAN WE BE SUCCESSFULLY ACCUSED OF
“TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN?”
ARE WE CHRISTIANS
“THE USUAL SUSPECTS” IN OUR WORLD?**

ILLUSTRATION

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in 18th century England, often preached to thousands in the open fields.

One of his sermons that impressed me (NOT IN PERSON, BUT IN PRINT) was based on this passage and this particular verse.

The people were simple country folk and usually illiterate. Therefore the sermons had to be both simple and portable, so they could absorb the message and take it with them.

Here is his sermon outline:

- I. Because of sin, this world is already “upside down”.
- II. Jesus Christ came and turned it “upside down” again.
- III. That means, that it is finally right side up again.

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ILLUSTRATION

As a college student, my minister was David Crawford. He made the ministry so attractive that I finally gave in to the call to ministry. He was energetic, intelligent, had a great sense of humor, was an athlete, and was a powerful preacher.

There are many things he said, but one I shall always remember. He asserted that the familiar hymn,

“BLESSED ASSURANCE, JESUS IS MINE”

should sometimes be reversed, so that it is

“BLESSED DISTURBANCE, I AM HIS!”

That’s the blessed disturbance of turning the world upside down.

HOW DO WE MEASURE UP

AS THOSE WHO

“TURN THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN?”

HERE ARE SOME OF THE THINGS

“TURNED UPSIDE DOWN” BY JESUS

AND HIS FOLLOWERS,

YESTERDAY AND TODAY.

EQUALITY FOR WOMEN.

When Jesus and Paul preached in the synagogue, the women were required to sit separately from the men. They either had to sit on one side away from the men, or they had to sit in the balcony (if there was one).

Moreover, they were forbidden to speak up in the discussions during classes. Rather, if they were to be instructed at all, it was to be by their husbands at home.

But many women as well as men were followers of Jesus. His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well was revolutionary. His healing of women as well as men, displayed His acceptance and celebration of them.

When Paul ordered women not to speak up in worship,¹ it was not because he thought them to be unworthy. Rather, with the exhilaration of their new-found freedom women experienced in Jesus, they were so excited as newcomers to the faith, that they interrupted the teachers constantly with their questions and fresh insights, to the extent that the speakers found it difficult to make their point!

In the cultures of that day, women were the property of their fathers, and then of their husbands when they got married.

Also in the centuries that followed, their equality was lost, and women were subjugated again. Gratefully, the world is being turned upside down again, as women are regaining their rightful place.

Bring in “the usual suspects” . . . the Christians!

LAW AND GRACE

Paul frequently recounts how he felt imprisoned by the Law, which he could not keep perfectly. He confessed that others saw him as an example of a Law-keeper, but he knew that, humanly, he could not keep the law completely. He felt failure and guilt.

In Jesus he discovered that God’s “love with no strings attached” (that’s what grace is) included forgiveness of his sin and a new freedom to live life to God’s glory. Therefore, Paul later reminded the Colossians and us,

**“. . . AS THE LORD HAS FORGIVEN YOU,
SO YOU MUST FORGIVE.”²**

This world is turned upside down when it sees the power of Christian forgiveness.

CHARITY + HOPE = MISSION

One of our most familiar quotations is only half stated. We hear,

“CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME!”

and it seems to be telling us that we should rightly just take care of our own. BUT, the complete quote provides the *reverse* of that as it sarcastically declares,

“CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME, AND USUALLY STAYS THERE!”

Jesus extends His love and caring to those He didn’t know and even to those who may not be believers in Him. On one occasion Jesus was approached by a Roman centurion, who asked Jesus to heal his servant, a non-believer,

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:34

² Colossians 3:13

who was ill and at home some miles away. Jesus agreed, and upon returning home, the centurion found his servant completely healed.³

Paul commended the Christians in Macedonia and Achaia, for their generosity in sending a magnificent offering to those in the church at Jerusalem, even though they had never laid eyes upon them.⁴

And how many organizations have been founded and supported by Christians over the centuries.

The mission efforts of this congregation continue that tradition.

Charity alone is admirable, but charity plus the message of hope found in Jesus Christ is healing and strengthening. Its name is mission.

It must be those Christians again! Bring in all the usual suspects!

JUSTICE

Again and again, Scripture urges us to do justice to all people. For example, one is expected to extend hospitality even to strangers. Survival in the desert can be a very tenuous thing. Even someone being pursued by an enemy is to be given hospitality and protection.

So familiar is the 23rd Psalm that we often miss the words,

**“. . . YOU PREPARE A TABLE BEFORE ME
IN THE PRESENCE OF MY ENEMIES. . .”⁵**

Doing the right thing is basic to our Biblical faith.

Often when justice is done, it's those darn Christians again, turning the world upside down!

THE WORLD'S CONSCIENCE

The world really gets bent out of shape when Christians “stick their noses into other people's business!”.

That usually means into business and government. And yet, the founders of our nation believed that we should be the whistle blowers who call each to do what is ethical.

It's those trouble-making Christians again. Those usual suspects are turning the world upside down.

³ Luke 7:1-10

⁴ Romans 15:26

⁵ Psalm 23:5

CONCLUSION

THE QUESTION FOR US IS:

**HAVE WE BEEN SUFFICIENTLY
CHANGED AND EMBOLDENED
TO GO INTO OUR WORLD AND
“TURN IT UPSIDE DOWN”
FOR THE GLORY OF GOD,
NO MATTER HOW UPSETTING IT
MAY BE TO OTHERS?**

**MAYBE BY DOING SO,
OTHERS MAY SUSPECT THAT WE HAVE BEEN WITH
JESUS
AND SAY,
“LOOK OUT, HERE COME THOSE CHRISTIANS AGAIN!”**

Amen