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**THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN**  
**ACTS 17:1-9**  
**A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL**  
**ON SUNDAY, JULY 17, 2022**  
**BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT**

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If you've been worshipping here at the Chapel in person or online throughout this summer, you know we've been working our way through the book of Acts. We've been reading the story of the early church together and learning of how they spread the message of Jesus, of repentance and forgiveness of sins from Jerusalem to all the nations, just as Jesus said they would. The stories of the early church have inspired, encouraged, and challenged us to be faithful to the good news of Jesus—a good news that challenges our perception of insiders and outsiders, of who belongs, and who may come to belong; a good news that encourages us to see God's presence in unexpected people and places; a good news that inspires us to listen as the Spirit speaks and guides us into new ways of loving and living.

At this point in the book of Acts, the focus of the story has shifted to Paul, formerly Saul, and his missionary activity. Paul and his companion Silas have been traveling through the region of Macedonia, a Roman province in the northern region of the Greek peninsula. They had gone there because Paul had a dream in which a Macedonian man was pleading with them to come and help. Paul took the dream to be a sign from God, and off they went to spread the message of Jesus there. On their journey, they stopped in the city of Philippi, where they shared about Jesus, drove out an evil spirit, disrupted the oppressive economic status quo, were beaten and imprisoned, saved the life of a jailer, and finally were released to continue their journey beyond Philippi.

This is where our reading picks up today. Paul and Silas were traveling the main east-west road across Macedonia when they came to Thessalonica, the leading city of Macedonia and the headquarters for the Roman governor. While there, they did what was their custom, and visited the synagogue to share with their Jewish brothers and sisters the message of Israel's Messiah—that is Jesus. Paul argued with his fellow Jews using the scriptures to show that the Messiah had to die and be raised from the dead, and that this ultimately points them to Jesus, the one Paul was proclaiming. Some of the Jews, and some Greeks too, were persuaded by this reasoning and joined Paul and Silas in following Jesus. This upset the Jewish authorities in Thessalonica, so they gathered a group of ruffians from the marketplace and stirred up the city against Paul and Silas and anyone who had joined them.

While they were searching for Paul and Silas they came upon the house of Jason where the men had been staying. They attacked his household, and though they couldn't find Paul and Silas, they drug Jason and other believers before the authorities to bring charges against them. This mob wanted the message these Christ followers were spreading to be stopped because they thought it was disruptive to their ways of living and being and believing. When they came before the Roman authorities, they brought the most serious charges they could image: Paul, Silas, Jason, and the other believers were turning the world upside down. They were disrupting that violently enforced "peace" that Rome pressed on its people, and, ultimately, they were guilty of treason by calling Jesus the king. When the people of the city and authorities heard these accusations, they were deeply disturbed, so they fined Jason and the others before letting them go.

There is so much going on in this story. Yet, this morning I want us to take a few moments to consider the charges against Paul, Silas, Jason, and the other believers. The overarching accusation against Paul and Silas is that they had been turning the world upside down everywhere they had been, and they had done the same in Thessalonica. It was a serious accusation for these leaders to claim that Paul and Silas were unsettling the status quo, disrupting the way the world works, and upsetting the norms that helped maintain the current order. You see, when God's message of forgiveness and freedom is proclaimed, especially in places dominated by oppression, the foundations of the status quo begin to crack and crumble—and those who benefit from that status quo often get angry. The message of Jesus and the way of life embodied by that message is a real threat to the basic patterns of any culture (past or present) dominated by oppressive and dehumanizing systems and values.

Paul and Silas's reputation had preceded them. The rumors of how the message of Jesus they proclaimed had disrupted economic, religious, and social realities in other cities must have already reached these Jewish leaders. Perhaps they had even heard about the liberation of the slave-girl in Philippi or the healing of the crippled man in Lystra or the confrontation with a false prophet in Cyprus. These leaders understood the significance of the message of Jesus—the one who is the liberating Lord who by his death and resurrection overcame death and created a new way of life and forgiveness. The message Paul and Silas proclaimed placed Jesus the Christ at the center, as Lord and liberator, and invited people to an alternative way of life, where every facet of life was impacted by Jesus. For those who were persuaded by the message of Jesus, no aspect of their individual or communal life was untouched—all their ways of being, all their ways of knowing, all their ways of relating to others, and all their ways of ordering their life together were shaped by Jesus being their Lord. Their former commitments, their former priorities, their former values all were reexamined in the light of Jesus's liberating love. And by inviting people into this re-evaluation of everything, Paul and Silas were at least threatening to turn, if not actually turning, the world upside down.

I can't help but wonder this morning if the church today, followers of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Christians at Duke Chapel, that is you and me, would be guilty of the same charges as these early Christians? Would people looking at our way of life together and the message we proclaim about Jesus charge us with turning the world upside down? You see, a message and an embodied way of life that places Jesus—and his message of forgiveness and freedom—at the center, that places Jesus as the ruler of all life will be disruptive to the things that are counter to it. And compared to a world where racism and white supremacy, economic exploitation and classism, xenophobia and the dehumanization of anyone who is not “us” all seem to be “right side up,” the message and the way of Jesus surely seems upside down. But I wonder today if there is evidence enough to bring us, as a church or as individuals, before the authorities to say that we're disrupting the death-dealing ways of the societal status quo. I wonder what that evidence would be. I wonder what that evidence should be. Or to put it another way, I wonder in what specific ways you or we are called to turn the problematic patterns of the world upside down.

Perhaps one of the ways our lives are to be contrary to the nature of the world around us is modeled by Jason and the other believers in this story. Jason and the others were attacked and beaten because their acceptance of the message of the Messiah led them to open their home. The leaders accused Jason of entertaining the message and the messengers of Jesus. Jason is guilty of a dangerous and disruptive hospitality. To be a homeowner in any time or place is already a relative sign of status and power and wealth. And to open one's home to another, to an outsider, to a stranger disrupts common expectations about ownership, the use of wealth, private property, and the intimate spaces of one's life. Jason demonstrated that because of his encounter with Jesus and Christ's message of forgiveness and freedom, Jason's wealth, his property, and even the most intimate places and spaces of his life were open to God's use and God's ways. The leaders who brought Jason before the city's authorities knew that even the kind of hospitality he showed was a sign that he was acting according to a king other than the emperor. This kind of welcome demonstrated that Jason was living by the way of King Jesus. When Jason put Jesus at the center, his way of life disrupted the destructive status quo of the society around him. He was turning the world upside down.

There are, of course, many ways we are called as individuals and as a church to live differently than our culture because of our commitment to Jesus and his ways. As one example, we can and should have many conversations and engage in many actions related to how we as a church in America are called to turn the death-dealing ways of racism in our world upside down. And these conversations will certainly include repenting of how the church, and especially the white church, has been complicit in creating and reinforcing racialized systems that on the whole have benefited white people and harmed people of color, especially those who are black. Based on these conversations and on our acts of repentance, we certainly will find new ways of being that center Jesus and his ways as we relate to one another.

Yet this morning, Jason's example compels us to consider the issue of housing more specifically, and how we use our possessions, and especially our homes, given our commitment to following Jesus. Obviously, focusing on housing is not a departure from the pernicious subject of racism, as the housing system and the economic

systems that support it have been shaped dramatically by racism in the US. Yet, it is a narrowing in on a particular aspect of our lives to consider what it could mean to turn the world upside down because of our faithfulness to the way of Jesus. The way we use the places we stay—whether we own them or not—is a sure sign of the disruption of societal status quo. If we open even our most intimate spaces and our most treasured possessions to be used by Jesus, then we will challenge and change the ways of our broken world. Like any major issue facing us today, the need for safe and affordable housing is a great problem—one that reveals that things need to be turned upside down for good. As a former pastor in Durham always used to say to his congregation, as the church we are called to “pick up the near edge of some great problem and act at some sacrifice to [ourselves].” So what might this look like today as we address the issue of housing needs in our community?

Perhaps it looks like what Deborah Hall did. Her story is recounted in the book *The Same Kind of Different as Me*. Because of her faith in Jesus, Deborah committed her life to service. She served at a shelter in her hometown for folks who are without housing. There she encountered and eventually befriended a man named Denver who had spent much of his life without proper housing. Because of the unlikely relationship that Deborah, her husband Ron, and Denver formed together, Denver eventually moved into the couple’s home to live. Despite racial, economic, social, and educational differences, the lives of these three became inextricably bound together with Christ at the center. After Deborah’s death, Ron and Denver traveled the US inspiring and encouraging folks to address the issue of homelessness in their cities by embracing a disruptive hospitality. On their visit to Durham, Ron and Denver suggested that if there were as many empty bedrooms in the homes of Christians in Durham as there were people experiencing homelessness here, then the problem of homelessness could be solved immediately. With suggestions like this, Ron and Denver were providing the kind of Christian imagination it would take to turn the world upside down.

Perhaps there are other more communal, corporate, and systemic ways this might look for us. Perhaps it will look like what church communities in Atlanta have done by creating the non-profit called “Focused Community Strategies.” FCS is an organization “that empowers neighborhoods to thrive. [It] invest[s] deeply in one under-resourced Atlanta neighborhood at a time, building upon the neighborhood’s strengths to create a flourishing community.” FCS challenges churches to put their money where their mouth is to address the need for safe, affordable, and long-term housing in neighborhoods throughout Atlanta. Instead of a simple charity that creates toxic and imbalanced relationships, FCS promotes neighboring, dignity, and development. With FCS, the lines between the helper and the helped get blurred as all are transformed in community together.

Focused Community Strategies, Denver, Ron, and Deborah are all turning the world upside down because of their encounters with Jesus. I don’t know precisely how we are called to do the same, but I believe we are called as those who’ve encountered the liberating love of Jesus to do it together. You see, for those of us who are persuaded by Jesus’s message, no aspect of our individual or communal lives are to be left untouched. All our ways of being, and knowing, and relating, and doing are shaped, formed, and made new by our encounter with the Lord Jesus. So let’s inspire each other; let’s encourage each other; let’s provoke one another in love; let’s dream and plan and act with each other, until the world’s turned upside down because of Jesus’s life in us. Amen.