

Sermon Series "Acts" - Paul & Bible Studies
Acts 17:1-15 / Acts 17 & I Thessalonians
Colebrook Congregational Church
August 13, 2017 / Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

The story of the Early Church continues with Paul's Second Missionary Journey already in progress. Last week, we heard about Paul & Silas & Timothy bringing the Gospel into Europe at Philippi. This week, they visit Thessalonika in Macedonia, gaining converts and suffering the wrath of the jealous; then to Beroea, seeing much success; and then on to Athens, arguing with the philosophers. And through it all, there was a constant theme of Christian Education.

So, the chapter begins with Paul and company traveling from Philippi to Thessalonika, which was the leading city of Macedonia as the provincial capital and a great commercial center, and later a major center of Christianity. When they got there, they followed a familiar pattern.

Paul went to the synagogue, and for three Sabbaths, he argued with them over the Scriptures. He was gaining a reputation throughout the Diaspora communities as an authoritative teacher of Scripture. Luke succinctly described Paul, more clearly in the Greek, as sifting through the Scripture, recovering its contemporary meaning, and then presenting the results of his studies: That it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead and that Messiah is Jesus.

He was able to persuade many to follow him, Jew and devout Gentile, male & female. However, there was a jealous reaction from others in the synagogue.

There is a new aspect added to the reaction against Paul and company. Instead of those upset committing to a riot, this time, they brought in ringers. They hired some ne'er-do-wells to riot in the market-place and all over the city. And here's the kicker, when the jealous ones couldn't find Paul or Silas or Timothy, they took Jason and some other believers who had shown them hospitality, and brought them to city authorities, and blamed them for all they unrest that the jealous ones themselves had paid to cause.

Imagine the audacity to do such a thing! This is not going to be the only time that something like this happened to Paul. His opponents using the riots that they instigate as evidence against the missionaries.

And then consider this from Jason's point of view. He gave hospitality, and they tried to punish him for it. It is a common trope in the Bible and many cultures that the virtue of hospitality is sacrosanct, and stories that want to invoke a negative reaction describe how it is violated.

Now, of the charges leveled against Jason and the others, the only one that the magistrates took seriously here and in future encounters is the supposed sedition against Caesar. Remember that Jesus said, "Give unto God that which is God's; Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." There shouldn't be an issue, but what the magistrates were concerned about and empowered to discover were any threats or disloyalty to Caesar. So the issue that they see, was whether or not the Christian Missionaries should be free to proclaim Jesus in a secular empire where the only legitimate ruler is Caesar. The Roman courts did recognize who were responsible for the unrests, and that it was due to theological reasons and not political reasons.

Realizing the danger, Paul & company traveled to Beroea, 45 miles west of Thessalonika. That distance is important to remember. A well-disciplined soldier can march about 20 miles per day, but a regular person cannot move that quickly, so the travel on foot was probably about 3-5 days.

When they got to Beroea, Paul did the same thing that he did in Thessalonika, but with different results. And Luke here compressed the story. Those at the synagogue are much more receptive, and they responded with much studying of the Scriptures.

They saw that Paul's preachings about Jesus were not the result of a fanciful reading of Scripture, rather that it was a competent testimony that they themselves could verify on their own. They did Bible Study and they were convinced and then believed in Jesus.

However, when the jealous ones back in Thessalonika heard about Paul's successes in Beroea, they traveled there and incited crowds against them, to the point that Paul was escorted by believers to Athens.

That seems rather vindictive of them, doesn't it? Can you imagine being so angry at someone that you are willing to walk 3-5 days and then incite a riot against someone. That's like if I walked from here to Yale, which is the same distance! And the Thessalonian city authorities did not even have jurisdiction in Beroea, either, being that far away, so there was nothing official to be done to Paul...it was just vindictiveness.

Once Paul made it to Athens, he sent for Silas and Timothy to join him there. When they did, he sent Timothy to Thessalonika to find out what was happening at the church there. Timothy rejoined the missionaries in Corinth in the next chapter with a favorable report, though the church was anxious about Paul's absence. So Paul wrote what we know as I Thessalonians to reassure them, and it is also the oldest book of the New Testament, dated to 51AD. In that Letter, chapter 2 confirmed what Luke had reported to this point, and also referenced a visit to Athens, but without the detail that Luke offered.

So, in Athens, the center of learning & education in the ancient world, while waiting for Timothy & Silas, Paul got upset with all the idolatry and spoke out against it, engaging the Epicureans and the Stoics.

Quick summary of those guys. Epicureans were materialistic, did whatever they could to avoid pain and suffering, and were atheists. Think Oscar Wilde and the Portrait of Dorian Grey. The Stoics were guided by analytical observations and careful reasoning, & seeking harmony with the cosmos. Like Marcus Aurelius, Thomas Jefferson, & Theodore Roosevelt.

These guys responded to Paul mockingly by calling him a “babbler,” the Greek word translates literally as “seed-picker.” The Greeks used speaking-related words to denigrate anyone who wasn't Greek as primitive and uncivilized. To them, you were either a Greek or a Barbarian, and the word barbarian even comes from the Greeks making fun of how non-Greeks sound to them when they talk. Bar bar bar.

Anyway, Paul has to respond to this, because the Athenians have a system when dealing with new things, so he was taken to the Areopagus, a place on a hill for city assemblies. The Greek word used for “took” is ambiguous. It can mean either to arrest, as in police custody, or to accompany, as in take along with. So, we don't know for certain if Paul went there voluntarily or not.

This assembly was called to determine if Paul had enough intellectual authority to bring his “strange teachings” into Athens. They needed to figure out if Paul is meeting their criteria. And the assembly was not hostile, but intellectually curious.

Paul gave a speech that answered their criteria, but in a subversive way. He introduced himself as an authoritative herald of a transcendent God whose residence is above Athens, requiring no residence in Athens, and not seeking entrance to the Pantheon.

Not what the assembly was expecting to hear.

Paul mostly railed against all the idols he saw, as being from a time of ignorance, which God had overlooked up until now, so that time is over. It is time to repent, because judgment is coming at some point.

When Paul got to the Resurrection, the assembly interrupted and scoffed at him, but some were still interested, and Paul left.

While Paul's experiences in Thessalonika and him being in Athens are confirmed by Paul's Letters, this speech is not mentioned by Paul himself. Most scholars feel that Paul would not have bothered getting drawn into an intellectual debate with Athenian philosophers and also Paul wouldn't focus on negative themes as the primary content of his message. Though the substance of his speech matches those found in his Letters to the Romans and Thessalonians, it is thought that Luke is presenting what ought to have happened or could have happened if Paul had engaged the Athenian philosophers.

Doing something like this is common in Judaism, called midrash, and I think it's very neat, and I wish that there was a Christian equivalent. The Midrash is a commentary on the Bible written by the Rabbis over the centuries, but is edited to read as if they were all in the same room at the same time having a discussion, even though they lived centuries apart. It's would be like reading something where Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, and Billy Graham are arguing with another about something. Maybe Luke is doing something like that here.

I see that the unifying theme of Chapter 17 is education. Paul engaged the Thessalonians in Bible Study, and even though they were Bible-believing Jews, like Paul was, they disagreed with his interpretation. Not everyone who accepts the authority of Scripture will interpret it, its theological meanings, or practical relevance in the same exact way. Just look at all the different types of Protestants. While some accepted Paul's interpretation and belief that the risen Jesus is the Messiah, anointed by God, and the fulfillment of God's promises; some did not, and they reacted badly.

We can see what happened in Berea as the contrast to Thessalonika. Paul was accepted and there was much Bible Study, and not just on the Sabbath-day. There surely must have been some disagreement with him there, but what we also see in contrast is that they did not start a riot. So we can also take away from this chapter is how not to respond to disagreements, like how the Thessalonians did. It seems that the Bereans peacefully talked it out.

And lastly is the engagement of secular intellectualism. Paul assumed a role like in a university setting that challenged the believers to be knowledgeable. It advocated not just Biblical literacy, but engagement with everything in the world, like what we would call being a Renaissance Man.

All of these stories in this chapter advocated learning, engagement, and interpretation of Scripture. And on that note, I would like to remind everyone that Bible Study is on Mondays at 6pm in Fellowship Hall.

Please Join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, we pray for Your Spirit to guide and inspire us in all of our pursuits, especially those that increase our understanding of Your Creation; and may we remember how not to express ourselves when we disagree with one another. Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

Loving God, We ask for the gift of Your Holy Spirit to help us pray as we ought, offering up to You our thanks and prayers for Your creation, its nations, and peoples, for your church, for ourselves and all in need.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for each breath we take; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who have sacrificed of themselves for us.

We ask Your forgiveness, for sins known & unknown. We pray to You in our weakness, because we cannot go through life's troubles unscathed. We are stressed and strained, but we know that we can do better and be more aware of ourselves and of those around us.

We pray for the energy and vision of Your Spirit, for those who are tiring in the battle against injustice and oppression; for those exhausted by the struggle with poverty and hunger. We ask for the hope and comfort of Your Spirit, for those whose lives are overshadowed by illness or pain; for those whose lives are darkened by sorrow or bereavement. We ask for the peace and joy of Your Spirit, for those living in the shadow of war and violence; for those eaten up by guilt and anxiety and whose life has become hard and dry. We ask for the guidance and strength of Your Spirit, for those uncertain how to use their time, talents and gifts; for those tempted to do what is wrong. We ask for the love and courage of Your Spirit, for those reaching out to comfort the distressed; for those reaching out to others with the Good News.

Help us to see Your presence in the hearts of others; grant that we may all be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; give us the courage to respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We also pray for:

The Suddath Family Deanna Muzzulin Sue Kenny Sean Larose

We offer these prayers in confidence and trust, as well as the prayers of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 5:1-8, 12

Give ear to my words, O Lord; give heed to my sighing. Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray. O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you. The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house, I will bow down towards your holy temple in awe of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.

For you bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover them with favour as with a shield.

Acts 17:1-15

After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.’ Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the market-places they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason’s house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.’ The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea; and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.

[Sermon covered Acts 17 & I Thessalonians]

[<http://bible.oremus.org/?q=369602014>]