

“TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN”

Acts 17: 1-9

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Weird is sometimes good: A week ago Saturday, I visited by son, his wife and my grandchildren who live outside of Owen Sound. Jackie and I gave my son Luke and his wife Jenny the day off, and we took care of the kids (ages 6, 3 and 1). Part of our day's excursion in Owen Sound was to take the kids to Tim Horton's for a hot chocolate and donut. The donut which the two oldest grandchildren chose was a new donut called "Dirt and Worms". I thought about the name of this donut and pondered how gross and unappetizing that was! But on second thought, I realized it was brilliant! Certainly, the kids liked the crunchy pieces of Oreo cookie and the 'gummy worms'. However, more than that, the name was so weird and the look of the donut so strange that it grabbed the kids' attention. This donut was so different from the rest of the donuts and that was a big part of its appeal.

Similarly, as I read today's scripture (and look at the donut) I ask myself the following question: How is the church different or 'upside down' from the surrounding culture that people are taking notice and following the way of Christ?

Suffering is necessary for love. In Acts 17: 3, Paul is stating that it was necessary for the Messiah (Jesus) to suffer, die and rise from the dead.... This message is so different and weird from what people were expecting. The people whom Paul was addressing thoroughly expected that the promised liberator (Messiah) was supposed to represent might, power and conquest, not suffering and death. This message was turning the understanding of God on its head. As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that God took the suffering, shame and death on himself, so that suffering and death is no longer an obstacle to us. Because Christ died and rose from the dead, we share in that resurrection and we all are given the opportunity to rise with him! In this great act of love, God in Jesus Christ laid aside his greatness, and suffered a painful death so we have the sure and certain hope of eternal life, and life abundant today and every day of our lives!

You know you are loved, when someone puts themselves aside for your benefit. For example, when you think of a couple - when one is sick, the healthy one will take care of the sick one. Especially when the illness goes on for an extended period of time, the loving spouse continues to put themselves aside for the sake of the other- and that is inspiring! That is agape love! 'Agape love' means that type of love that is in line with God's sacrificial love for us shown in Jesus Christ. This kind of love is so different and opposite from what we often experience in our culture and in the world.

The Early Church: What we read in Acts 17 is the beginning of the early church. Author Philip Yancey writes in his book, *Vanishing Grace*, how the early believers took Jesus' agenda to heart. The Christians organized relief projects for the poor and risked their lives to free those who were oppressed. When famine hit, they shared their food risking having enough for themselves. When illness was prevalent, the Christians were the ones who helped first and risked their own lives in catching highly contagious diseases. I understand that when Romans abandoned their babies to exposure and wild animals, Christians organized groups of 'wet nurses' to save them, keeping them alive for adoption into families. In the dying days of the Roman Empire, the world sat up and watched what the Christians were doing. People rushed to the churches and joined because these congregations stood for active caring communities. What the Romans were seeing in the church was so different from the brutality and lack of love and forgiveness found in society.

Individuals and Individualism: One could say that there is a disease out there that affects us often without us even knowing it. It is called the disease of individualism. Once we catch it, we naturally take it into our churches. There is a cure for the condition: the cure is you.

First of all, one needs to be aware that individualism is not individuality. Our individuality is a gift from God. We are each sacred and Holy in God's sight. When we love the Lord our God and love our neighbor as ourselves, God affirms the love that we naturally have for ourselves and our bodies. Individualism on the other hand is totally driven by self-interest. In terms of individualism, the question: "What is in it for me?" is the motivating question that stands behind all of the individual's actions.

Our western culture is an individualistic culture and it is important to be aware of that. In line with the early church in Acts 17: 6, we are to turn the world upside down and combat individualism in our thoughts and actions. We are to sacrifice, put ourselves aside for others.

Why is the church unique? The church's members and adherents are called to be followers of Christ. Since Christ suffered for the sake of others, we are to do the same. The church's values are to be upside down from values of an individualistic culture. The church of Jesus Christ is not defined by the culture around it or by the individuals who attend it, but by Christ. Bishop William Temple (1881-1944), Archbishop of Canterbury was known for his famous saying, "*The church is the only institution which exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members*" (Matthew 28: 16-20). This statement means that our primary focus should not be on ourselves and what we want (individualism), but on spreading the love of Christ by putting ourselves aside for the sake of others.

Though our primary focus is to be a light and a beacon of hope to the community around us, in order to do that, it is vitally important that at the same time we nurture our relationships of love and support within the body of the congregation. For example, we are called to 'bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Furthermore, Jesus said in John 13: 34, "*A new commandment I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you.*" If we are not strong in love from within, it is more difficult to minister to those outside of the church.

A contagious upside down church: A news item this week (October 26th) came out of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. A pizza shop owner was in the habit of making special deliveries of gift pizzas to his neighbouring businesses. "He'll throw a couple pies in and occasionally say, 'Hey, you guys are awesome,' and walk out and leave us lunch. That's just who he is. He is just a decent, genuine nice man," said Trey Phillips (a man from the neighbouring business). One of those genuine moments occurred when a woman sat down in Kurt's pizza restaurant. She was wearing a knit hat. Kurt went over to get her order and asked about the hat. The woman said she was battling cancer. Kurt did not end the conversation there, but gathered his staff around the table where the woman was sitting and said a short prayer with her.

The news of this event spread on Facebook. People started calling Kurt ordering pizza to 'pay it forward' (give away) to someone. Kurt said at least 20 people called and wanted to pay a pizza forward to someone. This act of kindness hit home as Trey Phillips also knew the woman who was battling cancer. All it can take is for someone to do something nice, and it catches on and becomes contagious.

That is what Jesus would want. Suffering for others by putting yourself aside for the sake of others may seem weird and upside down from the values of society, but it gives hope and vision to us and those we touch with the Love of Christ. What are you doing today to make the love of God contagious? We would serve Jesus well in making that a daily priority in your life. Amen.