



Renegade Gospel: The Rebel Jesus
“TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN”

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Scripture: Acts 17:1-9, Romans 12:2

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 marketplaces 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.

Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (The Message)

One of the greatest years of my life was the thirteen months I spent as a junior in college studying church music in West Berlin, Germany. I had the finest musical instruction anywhere, met people from all over the world, became fluent in German, and traveled throughout Europe. The only thing that suffered was my faith. I was very active as a Mennonite growing up as well as at the Lutheran university I attended. I was always part of a community of faith. I guess I took it for granted.

In Germany, however, I eventually figured out that society was very secular. You see, there is a state church in Germany, the Lutheran church, and German citizens supported the church

through their taxes. Unfortunately, most people felt that their religious obligations were thus taken care of, so it really wasn't necessary to practice their faith or to live a Christian lifestyle.

I soon realized that most of my German colleagues who were preparing for careers in church music were not people of faith. The church was simply a place of employment because that's where the choirs and the organs were. Whenever I'd play the organ in a local church as a substitute, there would be perhaps a dozen elderly women worshipping and that was it!

After twenty years of immersion in a faith that demanded that I practice a distinctly Christian and even revolutionary lifestyle, I was completely lost in a secular culture where lip service to Christianity was all that remained for most people. The fire in my spirit eventually became dim. But you know what? Losing my faith in Germany was the best thing that ever happened to me.

How challenging is Christianity at First United Methodist Church? How would you answer that question? In chapter two of our Lenten study, *Renegade Gospel*, Mike Slaughter makes the claim that Christianity is by its very nature countercultural.

Our scripture from Acts chapter 17 gives us a good picture of how the early Christian church stirred up trouble everywhere. The apostle Paul and his colleague Silas made a strategic trip to Thessalonica, which was Macedonia's largest port and residence of the provincial governor. Macedonia was in northern Greece. Paul, who saw himself as a missionary to the Gentiles, routinely visited larger cities first because news traveled faster from larger to smaller cities. Paul was able to engage in his evangelistic work in Thessalonica through tent-making and by receiving financial support from the church at Philippi, which was a hundred miles away.

Paul focused his ministry in Thessalonica by going first to the Jews in the synagogue. Paul's custom was to visit a synagogue three times to argue that Jesus was Lord through his suffering, death and resurrection. He said, "This is the Messiah Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you."

Some people believed Paul's message, including Jews, God-fearing Gentiles and many influential women. But other Jews became jealous, formed a mob and turned the city into an uproar. They were looking for Paul and his partner Silas, to charge them with treason.

Not finding Paul and Silas, they invaded the house of a man named Jason. Did you know that Jason is a biblical name? Indeed, it is! They dragged Jason and some others before the city authorities. Their charge? "These people who have been turning the world upside down, have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They're acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that Jesus is Lord." So the city officials charged them bail and then let them go.

For the first three hundred years of its existence, the Christian church was nothing but trouble. Christians were considered revolutionaries! It was illegal to be a Christian because they believed Jesus was Lord rather than Caesar. And they were very open about it! So the church often went underground. The early Christians accepted the dangers of their faith and were very aware of how Christians were persecuted and put to death by the thousands, either by crucifixion, being devoured by wild animals or being smeared with pitch and set ablaze. We use the word "martyr"

to describe someone who is put to death for their faith. In Greek, the word martyr means “witness.” These early Christians, who witnessed to their faith in Jesus, not only turned the world upside down, but the church grew by leaps and bounds.

Christianity spread like wildfire for the first three hundred years. Why? Because the early Christians had a compelling mission: to share the radical love of Jesus Christ for all people, especially those who were oppressed, dismissed or rejected by the Roman world in which they lived. The threat of persecution simply spurred them on. Then everything changed.

In 313 A.D. the Roman emperor Constantine issued the edict of Milan, legalizing Christian worship and leading to Christianity becoming the state religion of the Roman Empire. It was a good thing because the persecution and the martyrdom stopped. But the good thing also became a bad thing because Christians eventually turned complacent and became just like everyone else. Disciples of Jesus Christ lost their revolutionary lifestyle and prophetic edge. The same thing happened when the Lutheran church became the state church of Germany. And the same thing happens in our country today, doesn’t it?

So how is the church called to turn the world upside down now, in the year 2015? How do you and I avoid equating Christianity with Republicans or Democrats or the middle class or the business elite or those who are white or those who have health insurance or a retirement plan or have a college degree? What should our revolutionary lifestyle look like?

Romans chapter 12 gives us some advice. Eugene Peterson paraphrases the apostle Paul’s words to the Christians in Rome: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you and develops well-formed maturity in you.”

The New Revised Standard Version translates verse 2 this way: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Jesus calls you and me to a holiness that literally means “set apart for God.” We are called to holiness because God desires us to fully reflect God’s nature, not the nature of the world or our culture. Paul uses two words to describe this change, “conform” and “transform.”

When Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world, I think he means this: “Don’t make your life correspond to everything that is going on around you. Don’t be like a chameleon and change colors to match your surroundings.” Rather than be conformed, Paul urges us to be transformed. The Greek word for transformation is the same root that we use for the English word “metamorphosis.” When we are transformed by Jesus, our very essence is changed. We are no longer self-centered but Christ-centered.

And how are we transformed? Paul says we are transformed by the renewal of our minds. The Greek word for renewal implies that we are new in nature and character. Our minds are different, for we have the mind of Christ. Renewal means offering every action and moment to God.

Now some Christians deal with the countercultural nature of Romans 12:2 by withdrawing from society altogether. I remember very well an experience I had in high school. Although there was a Mennonite High School nearby, I attended the public high school, where there were still lots of Mennonites. I was in the choir, and one time we were doing a musical. Our choir director, Miss Nase, insisted that we girls had to put on make-up because, after all, we were singing on stage, and she wanted us to look professional. Makes perfect sense, doesn't it?

Well, the Mennonite girls in the choir absolutely refused to put on make-up, so we had a peaceful stand-off. The non-Mennonites thought we were stirring up trouble. "What's the big deal?" they said. "This is ridiculous!" But we said, "This is how many Mennonite Christians choose to be different from the world." In the end, the Mennonite girls performed without make-up and everything went just fine.

Other Christians go to the opposite extreme and simply identify with society and culture without question. They become totally indistinguishable from those around them who do not profess faith in Christ. In the committed life, however, disciples of Jesus stay in the secular world without being trapped by it and without failing to be a witness to it. We are in the world, but not of the world because we have been transformed by the renewing of our minds and are able to discern the will of God. You and I are called to convert the world to a different way of living and being. We turn the world upside down from the inside out.

I saw an interview with Mike Slaughter the other day where he talked about how his congregation answered the question, "What are the marks of a disciple at Ginghamburg United Methodist Church? How are we going to turn the world upside down?" They came up with three dimensions to being a disciple at Ginghamburg:

1. A disciple gives undivided devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord.
2. A disciple has a kingdom of God worldview: our purpose is to bring in God's kingdom of radical love.
3. A disciple has a missional lifestyle.

I find this especially interesting because as First Church enters multi-site ministry, we are going to have to define more clearly who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ, no matter what campus we attend. What is our campus-wide DNA? What is our purpose? How are we different from the world around us? Who is God calling us to become? How are we going to turn the world upside down so that we can bring in God's kingdom of radical love? How do we avoid trying to make Jesus fit into our worldview instead of transforming ourselves to fit into Jesus' worldview? How do we refuse to become so well-adjusted to our culture that we blend into it without even thinking? How do we change ourselves from the inside out?

Have you realized yet that it's not okay for James Robertson or anyone else to have to walk twenty-one miles to work in metro Detroit? It's not okay for Annie to sleep on the steps of Central United Methodist Church in Detroit when we live in our warm suburban homes. It's not okay for children not to have hats, gloves or warm clothes. It's not okay for the community of faith not to respond when they know of people who are in great need. It's not okay for 21,000 people to die every day in our world from hunger or hunger-related diseases. It's not okay for

countless people to earn in a year what some people earn in a day. If what we preach and if how we live, give and serve through First United Methodist Church is not good news for the poor, then it's not the gospel.

Yes, losing my faith in Berlin was the best that ever happened to me. Why? Because not too long after I came home, confused about my faith as well as despairing at the materialism I saw all around me in the U.S., Jesus appeared to me. Jesus came to me in the middle of the night, and my life was transformed forever. Jesus said, "Laurie, don't become so re-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, love and follow me. Let me change you from the inside out. I am turning your life upside down so that you can turn your world upside down." I have never forgotten that night.

How are Christians around the globe turning the world upside down? How is First Church turning the world upside down? How are you turning the world upside down?