

Focus in a Time of Fear
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
April 17, 2016

Acts 17:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Our narrative arc has skipped ahead 14 chapters in the book of Acts and quite a few important moments, so before we go too far into the sermon let's paint with a broad stroke a picture of what has happened...

The mission of the post-Pentecost church has now spread beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and the focus has shifted from what the Jerusalem-based disciples were doing on to the next way of leadership, missionaries travelling the far reaches of the known world scattering the gospel like seeds as they go.

Paul (that is, Saul) was introduced as a persecutor of the church (Acts 8:1, 3), who converted and began immediately proclaiming the gospel, which in turn drew persecution his way (Acts 9). Barnabas took Paul under his wing as a travelling missionary partner in Antioch and beyond (Acts 11:25-26; 13:1-4). The early church leaders then struggled through their first conflict, mainly about who was in and who was out, deciding to go with radical inclusion (Acts 15). After a leadership argument, Barnabas and Paul split up and go their separate ways (Acts 15:36-40).

By the time we reach chapter 17, Paul's independent mission has him traveling the Via Egnatia (Acts 17:1), a major Roman highway connecting the eastern and western parts of the empire. He stops at urban centers along the way, preaches the Good News to the Jewish community in the synagogues which converts some and angers others. Along the way, he sets up small Christ-following communities like the one we hear about today in Thessalonica.

Wooo! That's a lot to cover. Got it? Anyway... back to today's story.

Nobody matches the zeal of a new convert, or gets as much done as someone who doesn't know exactly what they're doing. Paul had both of those things going for him. In the Thessolonican synagogue, his words to the gathered body were clear and passionate. An educated man, he used a style of persuasion not unlike a lawyer methodically laying out his case.

His claim, something radically new and difficult for most to accept was this: "Jesus is Lord".

With typical Pauline enthusiasm, he sounds just a little bit like the 3 pack a day smoker who quits, or the person who just discovered a raw food diet and wants to help you change your life (when you weren't even aware you had a problem). Again and again he refers to their Hebrew scriptures, attempting to connect the promise of a Messiah found there to the reality of his experience with the risen Lord. Paul is passionate, and a bit zealous... but let's face it, for those who didn't want to hear it, he was also pretty annoying!

In last week's text, Peter could do what Jesus did, in exactly the way Jesus did it. Power! Authority! Healing! Boom! Proving that when we really see one another with the vision of Christ, miracles happen, lives change... communities change too.

This week? We are reminded that some people really, REALLY feel threatened by change, they fear it, and they will work against it, even to the point of inciting physical violence. This week, Paul has to deal with the same problems Jesus did, and the same problems nearly every other religious community has always had: Opposition, Inertia and Resistance to Change.

**When we are fearful to change, we seek to maintain control.
One way to do that is to create a culture of fear.**

In today's story, Jason is arrested and sent to prison for hosting Paul and Silas. Hospitality is the core value of his people. Making him pay for providing a welcome to these travelling missionaries was meant to turn poor Jason (and the fledging church) into something they were not. Inciting fear would not only hurt his household, but also affect the community at large. How much more difficult it will be for Paul and Silas to find hosts in the future? How could they draw an audience to them when doing so would land them all in jail?

When used correctly, fear can be the most effective tool to stop change in its tracks.

Lest we believe this story is a fairy tale that happened so long ago and far away, we can still see many examples in the world around us. If you can make the people fear the "other" they will shut the door themselves.

In 1918, hundreds of Europeans tried to relocate in the U.S. following the end of World War I. Waves of Italians, Greeks, Eastern Europeans and Russians came here only to find the task of assimilation more difficult than Northern Europeans had before them. This was partly because they were still perceived as wartime enemies, but also partly because their skin tone was often darker than previous waves of immigrants.

In the late 1930's, a wave of European Jews came to our shores seeking political asylum from the rise of Nazism in central Europe. Some had the necessary means or connections and managed to enter the U.S., but most were turned away. A 1938 Fortune magazine poll found that 67% of Americans were opposed to allowing "*German, Austrian and other political refugees*" to come to the U.S. In one notorious case, an ocean liner named the St. Louis arrived in Miami, but was not allowed to disembark the more than 900 passengers — nearly all of them Jewish refugees.

The ship returned to Europe, where passengers were taken to concentration camps, to suffer and die in the Holocaust. Later, after World War II, America underwent a bit of cultural amnesia. Rather than atoning for our sins in closing the door to so many vulnerable Jewish people, we shifted our fears and turned away Christian Germans, because, you know, they might be Nazi's in disguise. I learned last weekend that David Parker, Kate's father, as a single young United Methodist clergyman took in a German family in his home when that fear was at its highest.

In 1975, the fall of Saigon sent hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese fleeing from a new Communist regime. Some had the means to travel, while others were forced onto flimsy vessels that were barely seaworthy. They came to be known as "*boat people*." Many had the U.S. as their ultimate destination, but our leaders resisted their relocation because of the fear that they would bring them the evil system of communism (when ironically, that was what they were fleeing from).

The Monroe Congregational Church was generous and brave enough to settle one of those Vietnamese families here in Monroe in the early 80's. Maybe some in our Young at Heart crowd who were here in those days can tell us about their experiences and give us a little strength and hope.

Because we live now in another state of fear...you remember last fall, when a deadly terror attack took at least 130 lives and wounded hundreds in Paris, France. At that time, polls showed clear majorities¹ of Americans supporting at least "*a pause*" in the resettlement of refugees from the region being roiled by the self-proclaimed Islamic State. And although we've since learned that the principal players in the attack were European nationals², there are those who continue to stoke the fire of fear.

You may remember that last fall a small group of us from MCC began learning more about Refugee Resettlement. We're struggling to move ahead with settling a family because we can't seem to find affordable housing. We have faith that it is out there. But we need you help to find it. If you have any leads, please speak to me.

It is our call as Christians to continue to follow the gospel, especially during times when fear seems to be winning.

It's easy to be faithful when life is going relatively well. But it's more difficult to trust in God and in each other when we struggle to believe that love, in the end, will win. And yet, from the days of Peter and Paul that's exactly what our ancestors have done. They stood up, proclaimed the gospel, set a trajectory for justice and freedom, and changed the world... even turning it on its head. Because they believed that love would win.

The religious ideals of the earliest Christians were so different from the mainstream Greco-Roman world, certainly their message caused trouble to those determined to maintain the status quo. They proclaimed a messiah who came in peace, a king who behaved very differently than the typical monarch.

And despite the persecution they suffered, they chose to live in hope.

¹ <http://www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/1173a1AfterParis.pdf>

² <http://www.npr.org/2015/11/19/456683674/suspected-planner-of-paris-attacks-took-conventional-journey-to-radicalization>

Paul's first letter to this same community of Thessalonians, written in the year 50 AD, is the earliest piece of Christian writing we have. In it, he refers to the persecution they once encountered as if it were a distant memory – one that formed them, in the same way a hot fire forges metal. His tone quickly shifts from remembering the past and towards the present and who it is they have now become. Paul reminds this little scrappy group of folks that they do not play by the Roman Emperors' rules, that they are – each one of them, a new creation in Christ. This means they have, deep in their very souls, a different way of operating in the world. Not one that is rooted in fear, but one that is centered of love of neighbor itself.

The church in Thessalonica is just one example of living in hope during a time of fear. They didn't give up. And Paul commends them. It is a hope in God and in the kingdom to come that allows the people in Thessalonica to deal with the setbacks they faced.

Our identity as Christians is still be rooted in faith, hope, mercy and forgiveness... so what has been our response to those who have tried to manage us using fear? How do we respond when it seems like cynicism has become its own industry? Hope is still our default setting, so let's stay focused on that. Amen.