

MAY 12
9AM | 11AM

turning the
world
upside down

TRANSFORMATIVE
COMMUNITY
SERMON SERIES

Sunday, May 12, 2024 | *Transformative Community*
“Turning the World Upside Down” | Acts 17:1-15 | Jess Scholten

God has been turning the world upside down since the beginning. A childless, elderly couple end up parenting an entire nation. God chooses the ridiculously young or nearly insane as prophets. A young boy takes down an entire army with a small stone. God promises a Messiah who will save the world, and it turns out God sends God's very self in Jesus Christ. This same Jesus doesn't preach might and power of the world but instead talks about power in weakness – that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Every chance he can, he preaches against hoarding wealth instead of encouraging it. And he ended up dying because he challenged the religious leaders to think entirely differently from the ways they had been thinking. And some of them – as you heard in the passage as they reacted by inciting the crowds – were furious about these new ways of thinking.

God has been turning the world upside down since the very beginning.

So, it's no wonder in our passage from Acts this morning, the disciples are accused of being the people who are turning the world upside down. **They are.** To every group they encounter, they are preaching something counter-intuitive, something against what would make sense, especially to those in power.

To the Greeks and the Gentiles, people who believe in multiple gods – gods who have **used** people instead of loving creation, they are preaching that there is one God who created them, loves them, and wants to be in a relationship with humanity. They are preaching that God wants relationship with them so much that God came to earth not to use people as some of the Greek and Roman gods have but instead to be connected to them, so that they can better be connected to others in healthy relationships. That whole – “do you know the muffin man” bit from the Confirmation Class a few weeks ago? The early church would agree that was preaching... 100% Do you know your neighbors? Are you part of a community? Do you know the muffin man – he lives around the corner... right on Whitney Way?

And then, to a culture that values power and money, those early disciples are proclaiming instead that we're all in this together, and we can live in community in a way where goods are distributed evenly, and we all serve one another. To a culture that looks down upon people who are weak, poor, young, widowed, differently abled, they are preaching special care for the least of these. And to a religious people waiting and longing for a **mighty** king, they are "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.'" As Marge noted last week, they are creating a ruckus! For group after group, they are turning worlds upside down in the whole book of Acts.

And here's the thing: people are **believing** them. Jewish leaders are looking carefully at the Scriptures with Paul and others and wondering: maybe this is God at work in the Messiah. Greeks who spent their lives bargaining with gods are suddenly overcome with the grace of a Creator that loves them and doesn't need sacrifice but instead asks for that grace and abundance to be shared with others. People who live in luxury are coming to the disciples to be baptized in the name of Jesus and supporting their community by sharing their homes and money... and finding this new way of life far more satisfying and meaningful. And by God's grace in Jesus Christ, people who are at the very bottom of society are experiencing welcome, provision, healing, and wholeness.

This is God's work through the disciples' witness. Again and again throughout Acts the power of the Holy Spirit is seen, forming and growing the church, forming and growing this new and beautiful community that is turning the world upside down.

But this new thing that God is doing in the world is not a new thing. It is the thing God has been doing in the world since breathing creation into existence, since sharing company with humans in the very beginning, and since proclaiming the goodness of creation. This new thing is just a branch of the same thing God has been doing since the beginning of time: working through people for renewal, granting the underdog special portions of God's Spirit, toppling the proud and raising up the downtrodden, granting abundance to widows, and regularly calling the underequipped.

Of course, God had to come to earth. Of course, God came not in the form of mighty royalty from the best region but born in a lousy little town, Bethlehem, to a poor girl from Nazareth. Of course, Jesus did not wield a sword but instead preached peace and love. Of course, the world did not accept him because it called everything we hold

dear like money and power into question. Of course, Jesus had to die a terrible death so we would have a mirror to see our own evil and propensity for jealousy, violence, and death. And of course, God raised him from the dead so that death itself could be conquered.

This is our good news. And like the disciples, we are called to go out into the world and live and proclaim this good news so that others can live in the kind of freedom that isn't offered anywhere else.

That's the whole story of Acts. It begins with God's Spirit blowing in the same new direction God's Spirit has always been blowing since the very beginning, moving over the murky chaos... and carrying with it power to create a new world. And it moves to a story on repeat – disciples on the move sharing the good news and encountering people who are swept away with the Spirit and baptized into the community... and others who are not interested in having their worlds turned upside down and do what they can to stop the disciples – fighting against them, creating false accusations, manipulating the crowds, flogging them, jailing them, sometimes killing them in order to keep the world exactly how they themselves would like it to be kept.

This happens until the greatest instigators are killed or imprisoned.

But of course, the story doesn't stop there.

Because even in prison, Paul writes letters to the communities they have established, rooting them in words of grace and comfort... and of challenge and call. In some ways, Paul's imprisonment blesses us because instead of being able to go and preach in these communities, he was bound by time and space and instead spread the Gospel in written words. We have the Gospels – the stories of Jesus from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Then we have Acts, this story of the formation of the church. And then the letters: Romans, the two letters to the Corinthians, to the Galatians, Ephesians, and others – all encouragements to these communities so that they **and we** can know better how to live out what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Because the call to turn the world upside down didn't stop 2000 years ago. It continues with us, with our call to share this good news of God's love, to be a community of grace and generosity, to tell the stories of God's work in the world throughout history and even today.

A few weeks ago, we heard amazing stories from Phil Haslanger about the transformation from hate to love, including Derek Black, a college-aged white supremacist leader, who was invited by Matthew Stephenson, an Orthodox Jew, to Shabbat dinner, and in the end was converted from hate to love.

[\(onbeing.org/programs/derek-black-and-matthew-stevenson-befriending-radical-disagreement/\)](http://onbeing.org/programs/derek-black-and-matthew-stevenson-befriending-radical-disagreement/)

It was a powerful sermon of contemporary leaders turning the world upside down. Last week, Paul Melrose highlighted Daryl Davis who helped convert over 200 members of the Ku Klux Klan (npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-ropes)

Two weeks ago, we heard from the Confirmands. Their testimonies included reflections like “every time I left confirmation, I felt happier and loved, and now I want to join the church and volunteer my time” (Sam K). “Being here feels like having an extra family” (Riess P). Those are some very **Acts** perspectives.

Next week is Pentecost, and our Pentecost offering is going toward Bikes4Kids – a Madison non-profit that works to increase the use of bicycles through access, low-cost repairs, and education. In the last six years, over 10,000 bikes have been distributed, saving 72,000 pounds from landfills and serving 172 other organizations.

Imagine if the church were continuing every day, in every place, with every single member seeking to change the world. We would be turning the world upside down. Sometimes we see it – when a new member reflects that they were starving for spiritual food, and they found it in their new church family here at Covenant – or when we seek after God in community, Scripture, and prayer and it turns our own lives upside down – in a surprising call or a movement to social justice. Last week, James McGregor shared with me about how his life has recently been turned upside down – from experiencing anxiety and fear all around him to learning to trust in God. He wanted to share his beautiful story of transformation with you. James....

[James McGregor testimony]

We have a chance every single day to make a difference, to change the world, to be the very disciples God is calling us to be. We have the chance to spread kindness, to volunteer our time, to show empathy to those in need, to move people to greater love and generosity. Let’s go turn the world upside down.