



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

February 23, 2014

"Two Little Words: Big Meaning" - Acts 19:23-41

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About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning "the Way."

That's the first verse of our scripture passage this morning in the Book of Acts, Chapter 19. This one verse tells the whole story. Various translations add more color to the verse without adding to the scriptures.

To quote a few: "A great commotion arose concerning the Way."

"There was serious trouble in Ephesus because of the Way."

"A big blow-up developed in Ephesus concerning the Christians."

"A huge ruckus occurred over what was now being referred to as 'the Way.'"

What we are sure of is there was a ruckus in Ephesus, and it had to do with a new belief system introduced to the city called "The Way." We know it today as the Christian faith. The Way—two little words with a big meaning. In Ephesus, they set in motion a powerful firestorm as the Christian faith engaged a bustling secular city. This story is really a microcosm of the church in the world today.

Luke wrote the Book of Acts. He wrote this story and he brings interest and humor to this ruckus in a way that as I read it, puts me

right there in the midst of it—all by way of a ruckus out of my past.

At my age, looking back at high school and college years seems a blur. As I look back, those early years of schooling are for me—and for those of you like me, I'm sure—not a smoothly running movie in my mind but a collection of mental snapshots. Here's one from my past.

Kentucky's basketball team under Adolph Rupp had won umpteen games—undefeated for a long long time. They had not lost a game on their home court in years, probably dating back to prehistoric times, way before their court was named Rupp Arena.

I have lived in Kentucky. If the people of Kentucky could have it their way the outline of the state on the map would be changed to the shape of a basketball. It's not just fans of the University of Kentucky. It's all of Kentucky. Kentucky is basketball, and the unthinkable happened.

The school I went to was not noted for basketball, which was especially true the year of which I speak. But that year my school, Georgia Tech, beat Kentucky on their own home court. I remember there was an immediate silence as my school went into shock. This was followed by instant bedlam.

Students came screaming from their dorms out into the night—grabbing, as they came, any item half-way suitable for a bonfire. The most popular items were the large cardboard boxes used by maintenance teams to collect trash. Dozens, maybe hundreds, were stacked in the large square between the dorms. In seconds the fire was easily 30 feet high. I can still see in my mind the giant orange flames that lit up the sky. Riots seem to incite bonfires. We've seen in the news the Ukraine riots. This was nothing like that, but it did start to get wild.

I was there. And I was there when the crowd started to run—hundreds out into the street—thousands by the time we reached North Avenue. I managed to ask a question to the guy passing me on my right. "What are we doing? Where are we going?" He struggled to answer as he darted past me into the racing crowd, but his words were clear. He said, "I have no idea what I'm doing or where I'm going." Neither did I.

So likewise the people in the riot at Ephesus.

Luke says it this way: "Some were shouting one thing, some another... Most of them did not know why they had come together." (v. 32)

Same actions. Different reasons. It turns out the campus riot ended up at President Harrison's mansion begging for a school holiday the next day. It didn't happen.

And it turns out the Ephesus riot ended up in the stadium where thousands of Greek Citizens were gathering to demand that a man named Paul be put out of business. It didn't happen.

On the surface, Luke's account is about politics and the almighty dollar. Underneath it all is the power of the Gospel. It's not unlike the world we live in today, so there are some lessons for us here.

Here's the story. The whole story is longer than this but I'm just going to read for now verses 23-32 from Chapter 19 of the Book of Acts.

How many of you have visited Ephesus? How many have visited Israel and the Holy Land? Mimi and I have visited both and as inspiring as it was to walk the streets where Jesus and His disciples walked, I have never been inspired like I was when we visited Ephesus.

You see, in so many of the places in the Holy Land where God's power was displayed, Jesus was on the scene—His presence and His power, right there where He could be seen and heard. In the Holy Land we visited places where Jesus taught the people and sat with His disciples to instruct them.

Paul didn't have any of that in Ephesus. Jesus didn't sail with Paul into Ephesus. Jesus wasn't there to sit down with Paul and give him encouragement and

wise counsel. Paul couldn't see with his eyes the healing and transforming power Jesus demonstrated everywhere He went.

In other words, Paul was like you and me. He had to walk by faith. He had to trust an unseen Partner as he daily walked out into an unbelieving world with the same commission given to you and me—to make the Gospel known. And he did it. Paul transformed Ephesus. A city of a quarter million that had never heard of Jesus became a city with God's most solid church—God's flagship church throughout all of Asia. Amazing!

How did Paul do it? How did Paul engage this culture? There's much to learn here. I've made a bunch of observations that I think would be helpful to share, but I'm going to use just the top four. These four things are important to me. I hope they will help you.

1. The Undisputed Daily Life

Daily living sounds pretty innocent—even boring, but I think it was the number one factor in the success of the Gospel in Ephesus.

Ephesus was a big and important city in the ancient world, second only to Rome. It was up-scale in every way as you can tell by these slides on our screen: business, education, art, entertainment, theater, public hygiene, and a training grounds for athletes like those preparing for the Olympics. It had an air-conditioned library, a complex sewer system under all the streets that would rival ours and an aqueduct system that provided water to the entire city. Its public baths and spas were known the world over.

Ephesus boasted the largest outdoor theater in the world. It held 25,000 people. That number approaches half the capacity of Aloha Stadium. The photo on the screen of the theater is one I took. I was standing about halfway up the stadium when I took it.

Forgive the quality of this picture. It's actually a photo of the photo I have hanging on the wall in my office. As you look down in this photo, one of those little people down there is my wife. As you look out to the right you can see what looks like a street extending out to the horizon.

In Paul's day that was a street—two football fields wide and paved in marble. It was seven football fields long, all in marble, and lined on both sides with shops and boutiques. Mimi would have loved walking down that street in 52 A.D. It was to Asia what Ala Moana has been to the Pacific Rim.

At the end of that marble street was a busy seaport on the Aegean Sea where travelers and tourists constantly came and went. Eventually, silt and sand covered the area and now the ocean is about seven miles away. In Paul's time if you sat where I was standing to take this photo, you would be looking at the sea and a beautiful landscape.

All the outdoor theaters of that day were built facing pleasing views like this. Our tour guide said that was for an important reason. You paid good money to come and hear a lecture or see a play. If the talk or play got boring you still got your money's worth from the view alone.

Wouldn't it be great if we could build our sanctuary out over the ninth green on the other side, and have all the seats facing out toward the Ko'olau and the ocean. But you don't need that because we never get boring up here. Right? Don't answer that!

And, oh yes, let me not forget the biggie—religion. They had plenty of it in Ephesus. They primarily worshipped the goddess Artemis. There was also magic, psychic readings, superstitions galore, and astrology, but it mostly all came together in the goddess, Artemis. Artemis is the name she was known by among the Greeks. The Romans knew her as Dianna.

Artemis, or Dianna, was not an evil or sensuous goddess. She was thought to primarily watch over the special needs of women—their health and their safety. She was worshipped all over Asia but the seat of her power was in Ephesus.

In fact, a huge temple was built in Ephesus in her honor—so magnificent that it was considered to be one of the seven wonders of the world. Only one column of that building is still standing.

The question is: How do you extend the Gospel to a culture that has no apparent needs—a culture that has everything? To a person in such a culture it can be an insult to suggest they have need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We know all about that, don't we? We all have family and friends or classmates or colleagues who are getting along fine without the Gospel. They don't feel lost at all. In fact, some of them have qualities we look up

to and try to emulate—good people.

We can try to get them to come to church with us. In a worship service they may come to sense the presence of God's Spirit and feel a hunger for God. Certainly, if they came to Alpha they would hear a clear presentation of the Gospel and meet others who could stimulate their thinking about the purpose and goal of life. But what if we can't get them to come to church. Then what do you do?

The church in Ephesus did it by the lives they lived. You can't miss seeing this as you read this story. Paul and the believing community made an impact on the leaders of Ephesus—even upon those who did not believe.

When Paul was determined to join that riot and go into the stadium to defend himself, it was his friends among the city officials who ultimately talked him out of it.

“Even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to [Paul], sent him a message not to venture into the theater.” (v. 31)

His welfare was important to leaders of the city. They may have saved his life. Paul had friends in high places who cared for him and what he stood for. He didn't get to that place by jockeying politically. He got there by being authentic and having respect for those in authority.

In fact, the church in Ephesus had gained the respect of the town's top official—the clerk of the city. When the riot got into the stadium the clerk appeared and assured them nothing wrong had been done, that the people of the Way had not trashed their

goddess, and for everybody to go home.

He said, *“You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the artisans have a complaint the courts are open and there are proconsuls;...When he had said this he dismissed the [crowd]. (vv.37-41)*

When I was a young Christian in college I used to think I could reach my pagan professors by adding little sentences to my essays that implied they were lost without Christ. It didn't work. I learned later that such strategy was a huge turn-off. I learned that what really awakens those who have authority over us to our beliefs is to be authentic and do a good job.

2. The Unconquerable Gospel

We are told in previous verses that when Paul first got to Ephesus, he discovered a small band of people who had heard of Jesus and were trying to follow His teachings—without opening their hearts to Jesus.

Boy, do I ever know what that's like. That's the story of my whole boyhood until I was practically college-aged. I searched desperately for somebody who could tell me what was missing. I believed in Jesus—everything He said, everything He taught. But I knew something was missing. I felt like a machine with all the parts but just not plugged in. Finally God sent Paul. Only in my case his name was Andy.

It took a while for me to understand but Andy was patient. I never knew that there was such a thing as the Holy Spirit.

Oh, I knew, but I didn't know that if I opened my life to Jesus Christ His Spirit would enter my life and give me the desire and power to live for God.

This Ephesus group that numbered about twelve didn't know that either—never heard of it. They did what I found I had to do. They opened their lives to Jesus Christ and publicly professed Him to be their Lord and Savior.

This was the beginning of the church in Ephesus.

Next, Paul went to the Ephesian synagogue to the Jews who believed in God. He preached the Gospel—that the Messiah had come—but many did not receive it, so he went next door to the Gentiles.

Reading from verses 8-10: *“[Paul] entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking [those who believed] with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks [were given opportunity] To hear the Word of the Lord.”*

Paul spoke boldly the Gospel to his Jewish cohorts and many refused to believe but he didn't change his message. He didn't water it down to make it more palatable, but took it to those who would receive it. And every morning in a borrowed classroom—a lecture hall—Paul presented the simple Gospel to any who would come and listen. What is that simple Gospel?

Writing later from prison in Rome Paul reminded the Ephesians: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”* (Eph. 2:8,9)

Paul did not transform Ephesus. He did not build a church in Ephesus. The Holy Spirit built the church through the power of the simple Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are simply pawns in God's hands. The key is to stay in God's hands and stay true to salvation through God's grace in Jesus Christ alone.

3. The Invaluable Lay Person

Paul was an apostle. Most of us are not. We are disciples—lay people who are followers of Christ. It's all well and good what Paul did, but how can we relate to that? The truth is lay people may have been key to God reaching Ephesus.

You know, every letter that the Apostle Paul wrote, he wrote primarily to solve some problem or speak to some controversy—except the letter that he wrote to the church at Ephesus. The Ephesian church had become solid and strong, so much so that his letter to them became an essay on what should be the purpose of the church and its ministry.

And in that essay he says this: *“The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”* (Eph.4:11.12)

What Paul is saying is that his job as an apostle and my job as a pastor is primarily to equip you so

you can go and do ministry and build up the body of Christ. You, the lay people are the key to ministry.

I do not allow the teams I work with at First Prez to use the word "program." Football teams have programs. Schools have programs. Television has programs. And as we have learned from the Olympics over these past two weeks, ice skating has programs. The church has not been called to put on programs. The church does ministry. And our job as pastors is to equip you to do it.

That's why we have the Life Training Classes on Sunday mornings. We meet in here on Sunday mornings for worship. There's always some training going on here but this hour is mostly for worship. The Life Training classes are mostly for training so that you can be equipped to Serve Christ with your special gifts.

Aquilla and Priscillas were the key lay people in Ephesus. They are not mentioned in this chapter but they were there in Ephesus big time. They became believers in Corinth. Paul met them there and they became close friends. Later Paul brought them to Ephesus and—as we read from other Bible passages—the growing church met in their house.

Priscilla and Aquilla were a hospitable Jewish couple who were loved especially among the Gentile Christians. They were also theologically astute. Apollos was an eloquent, passionate, and intellectually endowed preacher, but when he came to Ephesus and began to preach Aquilla and Priscilla looked at each other and said "Uh-oh!"

Here's what verse 26 says in chapter 18: "[Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquilla heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more fully."

When it's all said and done, Aquilla and Priscilla may have had more of an impact on the city of Ephesus than did even the Apostle Paul.

4. The Inevitable Conflict

It is said that of the ten commandments, the one most broken is the second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship. (Exodus 20:4,5)

It's most broken because we tend to make God into a shape that suits our style—not tangibly but theologically.

Suppose a large group of people with that kind of theological freedom were to come together and make an actual statue that reflected all their theological styles. It would look pretty grotesque wouldn't it? It would look pretty weird. What you would have is a statue that looks like the statue of the Ephesian goddess, Artemis. To top it off, literally, were the astrological signs of the Zodiac on the top of the head of Artemis. There was something for everybody.

As the church in Ephesus grew, the new Christians caught on quickly and quit buying the little silver replicas of Artemis that Demetrius and his franchised dealers all over the city were

selling. It's a testimony to the power of the Gospel that in a city of a quarter million people the idol business had dropped off so dramatically that the head of the church, the Apostle Paul, was in danger. And this happened without Paul talking down their goddess.

But there was another part to this conflict that didn't have to do with Demetrius and money. It had to do with the exclusivism of Jesus Christ. In 52 A.D. in Asia the Christians were known as people of "the Way." It's, of course, from the words of Jesus where he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

This is confirmed in Acts 4:12: "This Jesus...has become the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

That Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation is always an ultimate sticking point. The scripture statement that "at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every mouth confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" is a huge affront to one who worships another god or goddess. It was the sticking point in Paul's day and it is in our day, too. It may help in clarifying this important point to outline three major views that are out there today.

There is the view that we hold that could be called *exclusivism*—not a popular word in our society. This is the view that says Jesus Christ rejects no one who comes to Him—that His arms are not only open to all but that He invites all to come to Him. It also says He alone is the only way of salvation. There are

many, many passages in the Bible that categorically and absolutely make this statement very clearly. In fact, the Bible itself is the extended story of this truth.

There is a second view that can be called *inclusivism*. This view says that those who don't know Jesus Christ but fully trust in another god are really trusting Jesus Christ for their salvation. They just don't call their god by the name of Jesus, but call it something else. There is absolutely no support for this view in the Bible.

There is a third view that can be called *pluralism*. This view says that every god is valid as long as a person is sincere, fully committed, and loyal to their god. Again, there is absolutely no biblical support for this view.

The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is not "a way" but "the Way"—the only way of salvation. We need to know that universally such a position will never be popular. If you stay true to this biblical position you will inevitably meet conflict.

I began with a college story about me. I'll end with a college story about my wife. As a freshman at the University of Georgia and as a fairly new Christian, Mimi found as she talked with others that there was a spiritual hunger in her dorm. So with a friend, she started a Bible study.

Soon several girls came to put their trust in Christ (she is still in touch with most of them). Mimi sensed the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit and continued to see God's hand at work as the new Christians met together and prayed for the whole school.

Not long after, it was reported to the dorm authorities that Mimi was teaching that those who belonged to a specific religion were doomed to hell (I won't mention what religion that was). She, just like Paul in Ephesus never taught that. She never berated the beliefs of others. She simply opened the Bible and let the Bible speak for itself.

A meeting was called to get to the bottom of the issue. All the parties involved came together and Mimi was on the hot spot. Suddenly the Dorm Supervisor appeared—one with whom Mimi had gotten to be a friend. The supervisor said there was no need to have the meeting, that everything had been worked out to everyone's satisfaction. End of issue.

Mimi says her impressions from that whole dramatic episode were: One, the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives through the simple Gospel story. There was no special thing that Mimi did except to open the Bible with a group of girls in the freshman dorm. And two; if you lift up Jesus and his death on the cross, He will take care of any conflict that comes from it.

Yes, we need to know that in our very tolerant world there will be conflict if we continue to be people of "the Way." And we also need to know that when we do so we place ourselves in very good company.

Let's pray: Our God, we do not deserve to hold in our hands the precious, extravagant, fragile Gospel of Jesus Christ who is Lord of lords and King of kings. Give us grace to hold it humbly, carry it carefully, and share it faithfully. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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