

Today we hear from two different narrators about early church events in Thessalonika. Paul, who wrote to the church in Thessalonika between 41 and 50, and Luke, who wrote Acts in about 85, had somewhat different perspectives. However, even with the misleading juxtaposition of these two stories, and the risk of harmonizing them, there are some interesting observations to make.

The later story was read first today. Luke suggests that Paul's habit when he came to a new city was to go to the synagogue and get acquainted and offer his thoughts on Jesus as the long-awaited messiah. This is what he did upon arriving in Thessalonika, and you will not be surprised to hear that he was not met with unanimous enthusiasm. Luke says that some of the synagogue members were persuaded, along with some devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women, who I guess didn't count as synagogue members. But "the Jews became jealous" and recruited some good-for-nothings from the marketplace to attack the house where Paul and Silas were staying. They dragged Jason and some other believers to the city authorities and accused them of acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, "saying that there is another king named Jesus." Jason had to post bail, and then he was let go. I see that right after our reading, in verse 11, "that very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea," so maybe the Thessalonians had had as much good news as they could take for a while.

What stands out in this story is the strong resistance of the synagogue members to Paul's message. Luke wants to explain to his readers why the Jesus movement did so much outreach to Gentiles, and failed to bring the entire Jewish community along. This is one of his explanations. But when he says that "the Jews became jealous," I don't think it means that

they were literally envious. They were at home, in a well-established synagogue. Paul and Silas were itinerants, not likely to take over. Rather, I think “jealous” here means the way God is a “jealous God.” God does not permit divided allegiances, such that you might worship both God and Ba’al, and the Jews are concerned that Paul has brought an unhinged and distracting teaching that does not build up people’s understanding but rather pulls them away from the truth. It would be like if someone came to church for a few weeks, went to Sunday School, and there started claiming a wild and very different interpretation of the gospel. We would be a little affronted, and resistant too. “The Jews” are jealous in the sense that they do not find Paul’s message helpful or in line with their understanding of God and the messiah.

And who can blame them? Paul himself said in many of his letters that he preached “Christ and him crucified.” That is, he cut to the chase, passing over Jesus’ teachings and healings, and just went straight in with the message that God’s messiah had come, fallen prey to the lethal power of the state, and after dying had popped right back up again, alive, well, and ready to keep spreading the reign of God. To Jews, Paul did not say, “This Jesus fits the category of Messiah.” He said, “this Jesus was the messiah, and we have to re-jigger our category of messiah to fit him.” No wonder most Jews were skeptical.

But what the Jews do to get rid of Paul is go to the pagan civil authorities, and those guys don’t care a bit about Jewish theology. To get their attention, the synagogue members have to put it in terms that pagans will understand: “They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.” That gets a reaction out of the city officials and does the trick. Paul and Silas are out of there.

When I consider this story in light of what we learn about the Thessalonian church as

Paul experienced it, I'm reminded of something Harriet Tubman said: "I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves." Whether the incident with the synagogue members actually happened, and it may not have, these characters come off as not recognizing good news when they hear it.

Paul *loves* the people in the actual *church* in Thessalonika. That is clear from his letter which, remember, is one of the very earliest Christian documents we have. He's writing to them a generation before Luke writes Acts, and he can't say enough about how great they are. This congregation is made up of former pagans—he says, "how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God." No mention of Jews; there may be Jewish Christians in this congregation, but they're not in the majority. We also believe that they are relatively poor, because later he talks about how he supported himself while he was there so as not to make life too hard for them, and he refers to them working with their hands, as if they're manual laborers. They have suffered persecutions from their neighbors, but they persist in works of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope. They are an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaëia. In chapter 4 he says that they don't even need him to write to them about love of the brothers and sisters, because God has taught them to love one another.

So Paul is just crazy about the Thessalonians; about ¾ of the letter is just how much he appreciates them. Perhaps they felt a little insecure about their worthiness or how well they fit into the wider church, because Paul assures them that God has *chosen* them. They received the gospel not just in word but also in power and in full conviction—it's like they "got it" in every cell of their bodies when he proclaimed Christ and him crucified. They heard good news and they were ready to make it the backbone of their lives.

This is what I mean in referring to Harriet Tubman's quote. When she says she could have freed a thousand more slaves if they'd known they were slaves, I imagine that the people who turned her down were afraid, maybe didn't believe it was possible to escape slavery, couldn't envision another life for themselves. Maybe some of them really thought this was the best they could do, and God would reward them in the sweet by-and-by. Fear and an inability to imagine that God really is good kept them in slavery. I imagine the Thessalonians—low-status and poor as they were—somehow grasped the reality of the good news.

First-century literature shows that death was the symbol of *all* that was wrong with the world. The ability of the empire to put Jesus to death established that the empire was in charge. For the Thessalonians to receive Paul's message of resurrection "in word and in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" means that they saw that the empire was not in charge. Death was not in charge. The God who had raised Jesus from death was in charge. The persecutions the Thessalonians suffered were not the big gaudy ones like being thrown to the lions. The persecutions were their own neighbors pressuring them to sacrifice to the civic deities and the emperor, because if those deities were not properly appeased, there could be a natural disaster like an earthquake, or barbarian enemies could attack them. In other words, the Thessalonians had to withstand constant social pressure that arose out of fear and a defensive posture toward the universe. And they withstood it by persisting in works of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope because they understood the universe to be fundamentally and reliably benevolent.

Paul says that this little church is well known because of their "being," that faith/love/hope combination. To be a Christian was to imitate Christ, but however much you

know about Jesus, he left a lot of things vague, so the job of the church is to set an example for people to imitate, which is what Paul says they are. They're not imitated because of their excellent arguments, which was Paul's specialty. You saw how far that got him in the Acts story. But at the same time, somehow these poor laborers had the imagination to put into action the reality of the resurrection.

It feels very strange to be asked, right now, to show our love by refraining from social contact. I know we all ache for people who've been put in impossible situations by this pandemic, but the ways we help are so impersonal—donating money, sewing masks, calling our legislators about this and that. It's really counterintuitive, but it's also an interesting challenge. How do we do the work that is ours to do, without the gratification of personal contact? If the Thessalonians were embedded in one kind of context of fear and death, we are certainly embedded in another. What is our ministry to be, that reflects our conviction that God is good, and greater than death?

David Brooks wrote in the *New York Times* Friday that the pandemic is actually bringing Americans closer together. He suggests that our polarization can be maintained only by constant efforts to dehumanize people who disagree with each other. It persists only because it gets fed regularly, not because it's human nature. I'll quote in part:

The pandemic has been a massive humanizing force — allowing us to see each other on a level much deeper than politics — see the fragility, the fear and the courage.

Referring to a “streamathon” of global artists which was designed to “let the world give itself a group hug, Brooks says,

as the thing evolved it became clear that people are not only reflecting on the current pain, they are also eager to build a different future.

If you tune in, you'll see a surprising layers of depth and vulnerability. You'll see people hungering for The Great Reset — the idea that we have to identify 10 unifying ideas (like national service) and focus energy around them.

Americans have responded to this with more generosity and solidarity than we had any right to expect. I've been on the phone all week with people launching projects to feed the hungry, comfort the grieving, perform little acts of fun with the young. You talk with these people and you think: Wow, you're a hidden treasure.

Doesn't that sound like Paul? "You're a hidden treasure." Maybe the vision we should keep before us while we can't do anything hands-on is the vision of a re-humanized society, finding ways to amplify people's kindness and solidarity with one another. Sometimes erroneous views need to be argued with and corrected, as that poor synagogue tried to do in the story from Acts, but at this time it seems that it is more faithful to be like the humble ex-pagan Thessalonians, knowing only Christ and him crucified, and putting all our energy into amplifying love and community.

Lord, we confess we do not like it when the entire world is turned upside-down. I am only human and like consistency and predictability. I do not do well with disruption and change. But, you sent us the living Christ to create justice. Therefore as the world is turned upside-down, let every lowly person be exalted and everyone in power be lowered. Help us to make justice roll down like waters and righteousness an ever-flowing stream, we pray. Amen