

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
October 26 & 27, 2013
John Crosby
REGENERATE: Living Radically
Acts 17:6**

We've gotten so used to hearing beautiful music like that for, well, thousands of years that it seems impossible to imagine a world where there wasn't a church, where Christianity wasn't a strong part of the world's activities. Yet Christianity as we know it was not from the outside a probable outcome. Its leader dies early in disgrace. The key followers are uneducated men who run away at the first sign of trouble. Christianity spread across the ancient world in basically two ways we don't usually think of or we don't think of one of them.

We would all say that Christianity spreads because some followers of Jesus intentionally set out to see that others knew about this new Kingdom of Heaven. We have this picture of missionaries going all over the world, but the primary way that Christianity spread around the ancient world was that the followers of Jesus kept getting kicked out of their homes. The Romans didn't even know about this new movement but every once in a while there would be a scandal that they would need to divert attention from. Taxes were getting too high, too many illegal immigrants were flooding across the borders or there was a new political scandal. They wanted to get attention away from that and so they often would pick on this group of followers of Jesus and start a new *pogram*, a holy war, and try to wipe the Christians out. The Christians would all have to leave their houses where everybody knew them and flee to a new city and in that new city, they would be known as followers of Jesus. Whether it was Jews pushing them out of the synagogue so they couldn't be there anymore or little pockets of followers of Jesus spread all over the world, that's how Christianity grew.

Most famously, we think of the apostle Paul as the spreader of Christianity. He probably took three or four trips around the Mediterranean basin, the Roman Empire, his second one probably about twenty years after the crucifixion. He followed the trade routes of the Roman Empire. He would go from place to place where there were cities and safety in travel, and he would talk about Jesus. On his second trip of going from one place to another, in the middle of the night he has a vision and in this vision a man is standing on the shore of a country that he has never been to, waving for him to come over.

Let's put that first map up. [Overhead shown.] This is the Mediterranean basin there between Turkey and Greece. Paul is on one of the shores and is about to sail across when he has a vision of a person in northeastern Greece, the province of Macedonia. The person is saying, "Please come here." Believing it was God, Paul went there and stopped in a town called Philippi. Paul has about three weeks there all told before he leaves. He doesn't preach much but he does preach a little and what happens is that he gets thrown in jail because he freed a slave girl from the demons that held her. Those demons were giving the slave girl's master great profit

and as Paul ruined his business, he stirs up a riot and Paul and Silas get thrown in prison. This is the famous part of the story in the Philippian jail that you all remember.

The first weird thing is that Paul and Silas are singing hymns in the middle of the night. Then comes an earthquake and all the slaves and prisoners are freed from their chains. They start to run out but Paul says, "No, no, no! Stay here." The jailer, thinking all of them had escaped, is about to kill himself but Paul says, "No, we're all here. Don't kill yourself." The reason this becomes famous is because the jailer has asked them a question. It had probably become a fire in his bones and he couldn't hold it inside anymore. He says, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And by saved, the jailer must have meant, "How do I get in on whatever you men have? You're singing in the middle of the night as prisoners. You heal people. You don't escape when you could escape, and you even forgive the people who put you in jail. How can I live like that? How can I be saved?" Everything turns around, and the very next day, Paul is escorted to the borders of the town in semi-honor, but he is told to leave and so he goes on.

From there, let's put the second map up, [Overhead shown.] he takes a walk from Philippi to Amphipolis and Apollonia and then to Thessalonica. We call them cities, but they were probably big villages a day or two apart, following that trade route again. When Paul gets to Thessalonica, he stops for a while, and that's where we pick up the story. Acts, chapter 17.

1 When Paul and his companions . . . came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. **2** As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days

so two weeks in a row,

he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, **3** explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. **4** Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. **5** But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas

Jason must have been their host,

in order to bring them out to the crowd. **6** But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world

who have turned the world upside down,

have now come here, **7** and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." **8** When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. **9** Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

Just another week in church. Last Sunday I was in San Francisco, and when I went to church there I had the privilege of hearing one of our friends preach, Gary Haugen from the International Justice Mission. Gary said, "I'd like to talk about what following God is like when

you are afraid, what it's like to do the will of God when the will of God is scary." That seemed to tie right into this passage that I had already picked out because what he was saying was what Jason and the other people in that house were already thinking. When Paul and Silas came to town, everything in their world turned upside down. Jason has only heard about this Jesus for two or two-and-a-half weeks when he decides to be a follower. When do you think that Jason and his friends figured out that following Jesus was not exactly what they thought it was going to be like? They thought following Jesus was believing that Jesus was God, but following Jesus was turning into repenting, having a changed life, new priorities, forgiveness, and what's this about going to jail? When do you think they figured out that following Jesus was different than they thought? Is your faith in Jesus something that is in your head or is it about repentance or life change or new priorities? Do you have a faith that ever leaves you scared?

This passage says, "In the end there are only two choices when we come across fear in our lives. We can get safe or we can get brave." We can run to safety or we can get brave. I think that is why the most common refrain in those second-grade Bibles, the most common thing that God ever says is "Don't be afraid" because so much makes us afraid. Jesus knows this. He wants to call us into places that are scary. Jesus seems to want to have His followers go to places where they are afraid so that they will become brave and not be safe. He doesn't seem to place a big value on you or me being safe. He wants us to become brave.

I think that's natural. Parents, for instance, want their kids to be safe. You want your kids to grow up safe. But you also want your kids to be brave, don't you? You know that being brave is better than being chicken, and so you try to teach your children how to be brave. Usually one of the ways that you do it is, you go a little bit ahead and you ask them to come along. You ask them to take a leap with you. That's what a parent does. Don't stay safe; be brave and it works in that setting. Then you get to a bigger jump and then you get to an even bigger jump. [Photo shown.] This is clearly a picture taken when the Dad immediately said, "Do not tell your mother that we just did this." We don't want our kids to be safe so much as we want them to be brave, but how does that happen? It's overcoming fear with an example of bravery, and then it's waiting for bravery to show up. Sometimes you have to wait for bravery for a long time, don't you? You know, there's the kid but where's the mom? Here's where the mom is. Freezing cold in the pool, calling the kid back to the edge because the kid is no dummy. The kid is no fool. He sees how far down it is. Dad can tread water as long as Dad wants, but I'm not going so sooner or later, Dad has to call out and say, "Please, honey. Please be brave."

I think parents and God have the same thing about bravery in common. First, God knows it's a lot more fun to be brave than it is to be scared. There is no joy in fear. Life is joyful and big if you are brave. It's an adventure. Life is small and sad if you insist on staying safe because you are afraid. I think the second thing that parents and God realize is that Jesus needs brave people to do good work in the world. It takes bravery to do good work that God wants done in the world. To love the needy, we need to go out of a comfortable site to places where we are uncomfortable or even afraid. God wants us to tell the truth and sometimes that will be scary to do because people will think poorly of us or yell at us. God needs brave people to do His work in the world. That's what this passage is about.

I love the line that says, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here, too." I've got to tell you, I don't think anybody turns the world upside down sitting in a pew in church. That doesn't happen unless you put \$175,000 in the offering plate in which case, God bless you, you're brave, come see me. But I don't think that happens very often. Nobody turns the world

upside down *in* church. It's only when they *leave* church as a different kind of braver person that the world starts to turn upside down. Or maybe the world doesn't turn upside down when Christians come into town. Maybe the world turns right side up and nobody is used to it. Maybe we live in an upside down world, and God wants to turn the world right side up. Why doesn't that happen more often when Christians come to town?

Frankly, it was probably never very common back then. They told the story of Paul and Silas because it was such an exception, but other people, other followers of Jesus, turned the world upside down, too, because they got brave instead of safe. They got brave instead of afraid. Early followers of Jesus started to go out to the city dump and take babies who were abandoned and bring them home, and when the plagues came to the city and people ran away, the Christians were the only ones who went back into the cities to take care of the dying. When they did that, people noticed. Francis of Assisi gives up his money and then he blesses the poor and blesses the rich and he gets a life of joy, and people noticed. William Wilberforce has it all and decides that God wants him to stop the slave trade, and people mocked him. For forty years people mocked him, but people noticed that he was brave. Missionaries like Paul and Silas went all around the world, and everywhere they went, hospitals were started and schools were opened and slavery was challenged and idols were exposed. People's lives were changed when they saw bravery and forgiveness and love together, and they started to think that maybe Jesus was their new King, too.

When did that stop? When did Presbyterians decide to be safe? When did we get so afraid? Dorothy Sayers was an Englishwoman, very bright, very worldly, who against her will almost became a Christian, and she looked at Christianity through jaundiced eyes. One time she says an English bishop was talking to her and said, "When early Christians came to a town, there were riots; when I show up, they invite me to tea." She wrote this,

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium.

And then that famous quote,

We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him "meek and mild," and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.

How did that happen? These people are turning the world upside down. Not really. Why does it stop happening? I was out in San Francisco this last week to listen to Gary but also because a group of us decided that one of the keys in a 21st century church is to identify young troublemakers, to encourage young catalytic leaders, to discover and train and excite young leaders of churches who will not know any better. We got a small group of young leaders and we spent the day saying, "How can we make you dangerous?" John Ortberg, a friend of ours was there, and he said, "Why aren't we dangerous any more?" He said,

I think it's because of this. When a church starts, it's all about the mission, right? If it's all about the mission, then you who are embarrassed and nervous and introverted will still invite your friends to come. You who are too busy will still go to the gym and set up

chairs. You for whom money is tight will still give money because the mission really counts, and we can change the city or at least our block or at least ourselves. The mission causes us to act with bravery. But time goes on and life becomes normal and mission turns into survival. We've got this church now. We've got all these bills to pay. We've got all these people coming in. We've got all this staff. We've got all these programs. Don't talk to me about doing something crazy. This is not the time to take that kind of risk. And so churches don't close their doors but they close their hearts.

We are approaching 60 years as a community at 70th and 100 and for me the question is, will we be brave for our mission or will we pray to be safe in hopes of surviving? Because while in some ways, it's about the pastor and it's about the elders, it's mostly about you. Are you going to be safe people or are you going to be brave? Are you going to take risks? Are you going to push us to take risks? Or are you going to say, "Oh, for God's sake, don't change"? Literally, for God's sake, don't change. Really? What is God calling us to do? I believe that brave people produce brave churches and fearful, cautious, shut-down people, well, they become Presbyterians.

I believe in a regenerating life. I believe that God wants to keep giving us energy. God is one who helps children be brave and jump, no matter how old they are. I believe God is making that happen here and if we jump, God will turn the world upside down. It's happening. Sometimes it's dramatic. I love Gary Haugen and the people from International Justice Mission. These are the people we support who go out and get kids out of sex slavery and the slavery of imprisonment. When they were first starting, one of our kids at another church I was at, she was a 2L, just going from first year of law to her second year, did a summer internship in India. People were frequently selling their children into contracts that essentially made them slaves. There was a tip that there were 40 or 41 of these kids hidden in a house, and she went out there with an interpreter and the documents from the government to free these kids. But when she got into the neighborhood, the interpreter started to get very nervous and said, "Oh, I think the police are on their side. This is not going to work." She knocks on the door but nobody comes to the door. She knocks again and the interpreter says, "That's a sign. Let's come back tomorrow." But the young woman, younger than most of our kids, said, "No, I'm getting sick and I'll be sicker tomorrow. Besides, if we don't get these kids today, they'll be gone tomorrow." And she bangs and bangs and bangs on the door and finally the door opens and 43 children come out of that house's basement, and they are rescued from slavery.

This little girl turned the world upside down because she chose to be brave. Sometimes it's dramatic. Sometimes it's a stretch. Usually being brave is a stretch. You do things you didn't think you would do and sometimes you even do them in public. It was an incredible day yesterday, wasn't it? God showed up in big ways yesterday. Yesterday was just incredible. Who would have ever believed that the University of Minnesota would beat Nebraska? God is alive! But yesterday was special for another reason, 17,000 people went temporarily crazy. They did what was called the Monster Dash, a half-marathon that most of them had never run before. Of those 17,000 people, 300 of them were extra crazy. They were running just to raise money for World Vision for clean water in Africa. Three hundred of our people and others in churches around the cities ran for clean water. I happen to know two of those runners. [Photo shown.] The one on the right is 27 years old. This is her fifth or sixth half-marathon. It was a walk in the park for her, but the one on the left is slightly older. That's her mother. The mother had never jogged more than three miles in her life when she said, "Yes, I'll do this because children around the world need water." That's where they are at the beginning of the marathon and she's laughing

and brave. [Photo shown.] There they are at the end but she happened to raise more money than anybody else. Together we raised more than \$150,000 for clean water around the world.

“These who have turned the world upside down have come here.” Sometimes it’s dramatic. Sometimes it’s a stretch, but usually it goes unnoticed. Rich Larson and some of his folks today after this service are going to be in the chapel for a special kind of service called Mosaic. Young Van [Van Chounlamountry, Director of Elevate] is going to preach. At Mosaic the ones who are leading look a lot like you but they are different. They are visibly different. They are autistic and handicapped. They stutter and are clumsy and are totally unused to being upfront. But at Mosaic, they will lead the prayers and will try to sing the songs and they will hear how Jesus loves them. It is the holiest worship service we do all month, and it’s because these kids have chosen to be brave instead of being safe. Mark Buchanan is a pastor, and he wrote a book called *Your Church Is Too Safe* [*Your Church Is Too Safe: Why Following Christ Turns the World Upside-Down*]. He closes it this way.

When Paul and Silas saunter into Thessalonica,

the story from today,

the hue and cry goes up, “These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.” The worry among the people of Thessalonica must be, as went Philippi, so will go Thessalonica. Here are men who don’t just talk about their faith. They live it. They live it in dangerous, radical, subversive ways, in ways that leave no part of society untouched: rich people, slave girls, demoniacs, jailers, prisoners and soccer moms. The business community, the religious world, the judicial powers. Nothing is left untouched. Nothing is as it was before. Once people like this get loose in your streets, no god, no demon, no bully, no system of oppression or corruption or seduction, no idolatry, no ideology, is safe again. Beware the men and women who turn the world upside down. Better yet become one.

I think it’s really important to realize that this is not John saying, “Be brave. Be brave.” That’s not what this is about. This is not a call to be brave. This is a call to be committed to the accusation of the people who put Paul and Silas into jail. Remember what the accusation was? “These who have turned the world upside down have come here, too.” They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another King, one called Jesus. I don’t want you to be brave. I want you to have King Jesus be your King and I want you to see where the King will take you.

Once in a while God graces us through His Spirit with something that is more than a coincidence. A couple of weeks ago Heather [Heather Hood, Minister of Worship and Music] suggested us doing something together as a community that would say, “We want to follow King Jesus and be brave.” We planned this and have cards that have this printed on them that we are going to give you as you leave.

That was a couple of weeks ago but then this Friday, the day before yesterday, we had a memorial service here for a little girl, who only lived 42 hours. At that memorial service, they asked this question, “What is your only comfort in life and death?” And in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, everybody responded together with these words. I’d like to ask you that same question, “Are you going to be afraid and safe or are you going to be brave?” Well, that

depends on your answer to this question. Would you answer this question with me, what is your only comfort in life and death? Together,

My only comfort in life and death is
that I am not my own,
but belong—
body and soul,
in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.
He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven:
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to Him,
Christ, by His Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me
wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on
to live for Him.

Lord God, it is easy for us to read and say aloud these words from hundreds of years ago. But I pray that they will be more than words, that they will be the cry of our hearts. We don't want to be afraid and safe; we want You to make us brave. Show us what You would have us do as our King in this upside down world, that we might go out and in very small ways love our neighbors, speak grace to our coworkers, forgive our friends, and serve our world in ways that turn the world upside down. We ask You to make us brave and not safe. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.