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National Presbyterian Church
The Early Church: Collateral Impact
Acts 19:1, 9, 23-34; Acts 16:16-23

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In our sermon series this year, we've been looking at the growth and spread of the early Christian church across the ancient Mediterranean world through the "lens" of a book in the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles.

Last week, we looked at Acts 17, and the impact of the gospel message on the *intellectual center* of Roman Empire – the city of Athens – where the great missionary, Paul, challenged the *prevailing spirit of the age* (in many ways, not too different from the spirit of our own age): whether it was the materialistic idolatry of the masses; or the more sophisticated philosophy of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers.

Today, I want us to think about what we might call the "collateral impact" of the Gospel on society as a whole – the side effects of the message of Jesus *for good*, not only within our lives, but beyond our lives, and beyond the church, in society.

And while the record of the impact of the church on society has often been deeply flawed, the fact is that over the centuries there has also been enormous collateral impact of the message of Jesus *for good*, in areas ranging from science and medicine, to politics and art: an impact that began in the early church in the world of economics – when the Gospel began to impact *not only people's hearts and minds but people's pockets*: their money!

So, for example, in the passage I just read in Acts 16, Paul, the great missionary of the early church, is in the city of Philippi, in northern Greece, before he heads south to the city of Athens. And he just happens to be going to a prayer meeting when he's pestered by a slave girl who seems a little odd. And we're told that Paul is really annoyed with her and prays for her! He prays for her to be released from evil, AND God answers with a "yes"! (*Which, by the way, means that God can and sometimes does hear our prayers whether we "feel spiritual or loving" OR even we feel annoyed!*). So her life is changed. BUT so too is her value to her owners. That is, before Paul's prayer she had this ability to see into the future and her owners had made a lot of money from using her gift. But now, with the healing of her soul, for whatever reason, the gift is gone and she becomes "economically useless!"

And the owners are mad! Not happy at all that she's healthy and normal; but mad at Paul and his friends whose relationship with God made known in Christ had caused *the loss of their personal income*.

And it's not only the owners who are mad, but the whole community: who make sure that Paul and his friends are beaten up and thrown into jail. In other words, they could see that *the collateral effect of the gospel on the slave girl* was not only bad for business for their friends, but that in time, perhaps, bad for *their* businesses too.

And it's the same kind of story that we see a couple of years later, in Acts 19: now in another city, the city of Ephesus, in western Turkey. Though, in Ephesus it's far more obvious that that

the collateral impact of the Gospel has the potential to affect *the whole of the economy* in a way far greater than Philippi.

So, Acts 19 tells us that Paul has been in Ephesus for 2 years, and the message of Jesus had begun to spread. And people were beginning to leave their idols behind and worship the one true God. Which is *all well and good* – unless a major part of the economy of the city in which you live is tied up with idolatry, the worship of these idols.

Think of other places where the economy is tied in to religious tourism. Think of Lourdes in France: prove that no miracles or visions have ever taken place there and the economy based on all the pilgrims and pilgrimages begins to fall apart.

And it was the same with the economy in Ephesus.

So much was tied into the worship of the goddess Artemis (whose Roman name was “Diana”) – with pilgrims coming to Ephesus *from across the world* and everyone buying a few nights in the hotels, and food in the market place, and all their religious kitsch, including *their miniature silver statuettes of Artemis*: because they believed that by worshiping Artemis, and especially having “Artemis in hand” as an idol, there’d be greater fertility in their fields and families.

BUT with the preaching of the Gospel of “*the One True Creator-God*,” and with lives being changed; and with more and more people no longer believing in idols or gods like Artemis, then the potential impact on the economy – so dependent on religious tourism – was enormous!

And so something had to be done. And a big employer known as Demetrius led the charge, mobilizing all the people affected economically to create a demonstration that turned vicious. Remember our passage (16:25-29):

A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, and *who provided no little amount of business to the craftsmen in the city*, gathered them together, with other workers in the same trade, and said, “*Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost the whole of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that “gods made with hands are not gods.” And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her.*”

When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, “*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!*”

The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s travel companions.

So just as in Philippi – what we find in Ephesus is that when the gospel comes into people’s lives it changes things: not only individual lives, bringing peace with God, and setting them free from sin, to love and serve God; but tangentially, collaterally, impacting *a whole web of relationships* in the secular society round about, and sometimes the *greater society itself, as a whole*.

Sociologist and historian Rodney Stark, in his book *The Triumph of Christianity* (2011, pp. 114-119), describes a period in the second century of the Christian church, in which, for example, the

widespread *sacrificial love of the Christian community* had a powerful “collateral” political impact on the future of the whole of the Roman empire.

This is what he writes:

In the year 165, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. It was lethal. During the 15-year duration – a quarter to a third of the population probably died of it.

Then a century later came another great plague. Once again the Greco-Roman world trembled as on all sides – family, friends and neighbors – died horribly.

No one knew how to treat the stricken, nor *did most people try*.

During the first plague, even the famous classical physician Galen fled Rome for his country estate where he stayed until the danger subsided. (DR: so the doctors had gone!!)

But for those who could not flee
the typical response when the first symptom appeared,
was often to throw victims – alive –
out of the houses and into the streets.
trying to avoid any contact with the afflicted whatsoever

But not so the Christians!

Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria wrote a letter at this time
that paints a different picture:

He Writes:

“Most of our brother showed unbounded love and loyalty,
never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another.
Heedless of danger – they took charge of the sick
attending to their every need administering to them in Christ
Many in nursing and curing others
transferred their death to themselves – and died in their stead.
The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner,
– a death in every way – the equal to martyrdom.”

AND what Stark argues is this: *That* this counter-cultural, self-sacrificing, love *made such a huge collateral impact* on the rest of the population that when the Roman Empire became officially Christian in the fourth century *it did so* NOT just because the Emperor Constantine legislated it; and NOT just because of a political decision, as if politics is the power behind everything; BUT just as much *it was the other way around: because, by the time politics entered the picture*, the Roman Christians had already won their way into the warp and woof of Roman society by how they lived, *and the political decision, merely followed as collateral impact*.

In other words, the early Christians did not set out to change the political structure of Rome “in the name of Christ” – to make Rome a Christian Nation. Rather, they set out to do the right and caring thing, and when they did so, *the collateral impact* followed.

And so too with Paul in Philippi and Ephesus – the same thing: Paul didn’t set out to turn the economies or societies upside down. But when lives were changed by his message, they were

changed *so significantly* –not just given an internal peace with Christ (though this is huge); not just given the eternal hope of heaven (though this too is huge); but given a moral integrity and power to face huge obstacles with a capacity to serve and care that overflowed from them and that changed all kinds of things in wonderful unintended ways – for good and God.

And that's what God wants to happen today, isn't it?

COLLATERAL IMPACT!

- Through you and me
- Through our lives with families, and friends and colleagues
- and through the church

And the message from *this is what you and I should be working for – praying for – and expecting.*

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