

Phil and I occasionally watch a streamed TV series on Toys that Built America, which sometimes gives us a nostalgic thrill as we learn more about toys from our childhood or our children's childhoods. Recently we saw an episode on Star Wars action figures. We learned that before the first Star Wars movie was released in 1977, George Lucas and company sought out the largest toy manufacturer in America—Mattel—and offered them the rights to all Star Wars toys and merchandise as a way to promote the upcoming movie. The Star Wars representatives thought this would be a no-brainer, a win-win situation. But, Mattel's CEO turned them down flat, stating bluntly---“movies don't sell toys”. This was a truism within the industry at the time. Which meant that instead, Kenner toys gambled on this yet unknown entity and purchased the Stars Wars rights; this propelled them from a mid-range toy manufacturer to the top of the heap almost overnight. Because Star Wars rocketed (see what I did there?) into a worldwide pop culture phenomenon and is one of the highest grossing media franchises of all time to this day, 47 years later. The world of pop culture was turned upside down by the success of this franchise and all which it inspired. It was a turning point in entertainment and marketing that propelled huge changes. But it didn't happen without risks, failures, and controversies along the way. And someone had to move past the time-honored notion that “movies don't sell toys.”

Is it just in the world of marketing and entertainment that turning points must happen? Not likely. Consider this local example. Knife River, as a community, initially survived by acting as a railroad center for the transportation of lumber and by commercial fishing. These village forebears were mostly Norwegian speaking immigrants, or some other flavor of Scandinavia. Times have changed, haven't they? Today, our railroad is strictly for tourism and recreational purposes, and virtually no one can make a living from commercial fishing anymore. Only a few people, including those who read our lesson this morning, speak Norwegian in the present day. If early on, this community had determined that transporting lumber and fishing commercially were the *only* ways to go, we'd likely not have a community anymore. But that didn't happen. The community became more diverse both in population and economy, as the inhabitants realized that change happens. People had to move beyond the notion that the community could only exist around fishing and lumber

and railroads. That change didn't necessarily happen seamlessly, by any means, but it happened. To this day, there are certainly those who grieve the loss of that earlier, smaller, more homogenous community, and understandably so. For them, all that has happened since has turned their world on its head.

Likewise, *this congregation* formed to *serve* those Norwegian settlers and their families, a Holy Spirit inspired ministry for sure! But if our congregation presently only included the descendants of those original settlers, we probably wouldn't still be around, would we? Or at least, we wouldn't look like the thriving Heart of the Community that we, in fact, are. As a congregation, we had to move beyond the idea of the church as including only those who first began it and their descendants. As the community changed, so did the congregation. Compared to our forebears, we are a colorful prism of diversity of backgrounds and occupations and political views. We are as large as we have ever been; we are as financially able as we have ever been. We've changed. And that change was also far from seamless. Hopefully we trust that the Holy Spirit has been a part of the energy and direction of those changes. Nevertheless, any long-time members probably feel a twinge or qualm every so often, recalling a smaller, very family-style church. Former members who return to visit feel discombobulated because they don't know a good portion of the congregation; the church they remember is no longer the church they see now, and it turns their perceptions upside down.

Our text from Acts this morning explains to us the story of the early church as it went through very much the same kind of turning points and changes as those we've just reflected upon. Our church began as a small group of Norwegian speaking immigrants; it very much served the immediate village. The first members were frequently related to one another by blood, and by language and Scandinavian culture. In a similar fashion, the early church in Acts began as a small group of Jewish men and women and was centered in Jerusalem, in the southern part of the tiny, occupied country that was Palestine at that time. They were led by men who had known Jesus personally. Those first members were often related to one another and were certainly bound together by Jewish traditions and culture. Many at that time might have felt that this was what defined the church-- that it was a small, Jewish sect of family and friends that had known Jesus personally. But let's reflect on this. Had we never, as a Knife River Church, moved beyond that original church of

Norwegian families, we likely would not be here today. In the same way, had the early church never moved beyond their small, insular beginnings, not only would *we* not be here today, but the church universal would likely not be *anywhere* today. There was a turning point in the early church upon which much depended; change had to happen for those new Christians; and as we've already observed, that kind of change is unsettling and turns people's worlds upside down. How did the Holy Spirit enable this all to happen?

Last Sunday, in Acts 3, we witnessed Peter and John heal a lame man outside of the Temple in Jerusalem, and as a result of Peter's proclamation following this healing, thousands became followers of Christ. We noted that the Holy Spirit was all over this fledgling church, and Peter and other disciples who had been a part of Jesus' earthly ministry were doing great things for God. But, they were operating within a relatively small and insular community within a small and insular occupied nation. The Holy Spirit was going to shake things up and move in new directions, and it was not without growing pains.

A lot has happened between Acts 3 last Sunday and our text from Acts 17 this Sunday. While the church in Jerusalem continued on with leaders like Peter and John and Stephen, other leaders were called by the Spirit to expand the ministry dramatically. Chief among these was Paul, originally Saul, a Jewish man who was a Roman citizen and had never lived within Palestine nor known Jesus during his earthly ministry. Paul was not one of the original gang. He had, in fact, begun as persecutor of what traditional Jews perceived as a Christian heresy of Judaism. When the first Christian was martyred by stoning, the brave and faithful Stephen, Saul was present in the crowd that did the stoning. But he has a dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus, where he encounters the Risen Christ in a vision. This becomes a turning point for the fledgling church. Because Paul will be the one who leads the charge to bring the faith to all the known world beyond that tiny, insular country of Palestine. He and other associates, also people who had not been a part of the original Jesus movement, will spread the faith throughout the Mediterranean basin, no small feat in the 1st C. Paul will perceive that this new faith movement, Christianity, can be shared with *all* people, regardless of whether or not they were Jewish in background. That had been an initial assumption for many early on: only those who were Jewish could become Christian. Since a miniscule percentage of the world's population at that time was Jewish

in background, this turning point had to happen, or the Church simply wouldn't have happened. That mantra that one must first be Jewish to become Christian had to be challenged, just as the notion that movies don't sell toys turned out to be outdated. Or that only Norwegian anglers could make up the church in Knife River, Minnesota. It was a huge gamble for that fledgling church, but Holy Spirit-inspired and absolutely necessary. You think there weren't members of that original Jewish group who had known Jesus personally who didn't grieve this change? Of course there were! Suddenly their company includes those who are part of that Greco-Roman world they abhorred, who spoke other languages, who didn't know and treasure their sacred stories from the Old Testament, and who shared no memories with them of Jesus on this earth. That had to be rough. This change caused a ruckus, both within the church and within the world surrounding the church; in fact, it turned that world upside down.

Look what happens in our text this morning. Paul and Silas are in Macedonia, a Roman province, heavily influenced by Hellenistic culture, in what is now Greece. They are nearly 1500 miles away from Jerusalem. Consider what transportation was like in the ancient world to fully appreciate this concept. Here's a fun fact we tend to forget: even in the time of Jesus and this early church, there were more Jews living outside of Palestine than within it, due to the dispersion of the Hebrew people during their times of exile and occupation. And so, even 1500 miles from Jerusalem, there is a Jewish population within this Roman province of Macedonia in the city of Thessalonica, and this group has established a Jewish synagogue there. Paul and Silas attend this synagogue on the Sabbath days, and they boldly make their case for Jesus as the awaited Messiah. We read, actually, that Paul argued for three Sabbaths in a row, presenting explanations and proofs. Paul loved to argue and was a gifted proclaimer in this manner, and we read, "some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women." I'm thinking three groups are actually referenced in that sentence: the Jewish men within the synagogue who converted, the non-Jewish Greeks who were seekers and in another section of the synagogue, and the women, who were in their appointed section of the synagogue. So, who is drawn to this Christian message? Some of the Jewish men, yes, but also non-Jewish Greek people, and many women; this movement that is establishing itself is

diverse culturally and in gender, and Paul is the one who writes that in Christ, there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free! Paul was a radical thinker, in keeping with the inclusive ministry of his Lord, Jesus the Messiah, who also had a place for everyone at the table. This kind of thinking is turning the world upside down.

Not only did this distress people within the very first and earliest Christian communities, as they adapted to the change. It disturbed people outside the church, both traditional Jews and those with authority in the Greco-Roman world, who felt threatened by the charisma and energy of this new movement. In our text, some of those traditional Jews who disliked Paul's success, went to their yellow pages, looked up Rent-A Ruffian, and managed to get a mob of ruffians and unruly folk to set the city into an uproar. They wanted to have Paul and Silas arrested for disturbing the peace; unable to find them, they settled for the man hosting Paul and Silas, an unfortunate individual named Jason, and had him arrested instead. And the way they described this Christian movement to the authorities was "these people who have been turning the world upside down have now come here."

What can we take away from this intriguing narrative describing the phenomenal growth of the early Christian church? It would seem that any movement or community that will have impact and staying power will have to evolve over time. This is true in the toy industry, true in the community of Knife River, true within Knife River Lutheran Church, and true within the early Church in our text. Such evolution, such change, such a series of turning points, are not painless. There is grief, resistance, and opposition, both within the movement or community and from without it. And yet without this kind of change and responsiveness, no community or movement can survive. It is what it is. It's how God works in the world. Sometimes we don't like it; it turns our world upside down. Being upside down can make the blood rush to our heads and we're uncomfortable and we may feel defensive or sad. That's legitimate. But we don't hang upside down on our own. The Holy Spirit is right there with us, and over time and through various kinds of processes, we find our way to stand upright again. Maybe over time we're even glad to see the life-giving impacts from the change we first resisted.

I would also wonder if a take-away from this text could be a challenging question for us: would our church, would any church, would Christians as a whole, be described in our time as “those who are turning the world upside down”? I’m not sure. But I’d like to think so. Not through violence or polarization or extremism; the early Christians turned the world upside down through inclusivity and a Gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. I would hope, that in our own ways, Christians everywhere and Christians here, are continuing to turn the world upside down through thoughtful and whole-hearted acts of welcome, compassion, peace-making, environmental responsibility, and bridge-building. If that isn’t happening, how are we carrying on the ministry of our Lord and those earliest followers? Where is the Holy Spirit inspiring us—individually and collectively---to turn the world upside down? Amen.