

# Trinity United Methodist Church

September 1, 2019

**“Action Packed Summer – Turning the World Upside Down”**

**Pastor Dan Elmore**

## **Scripture: Acts 17:1-9**

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 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. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. 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 in order to bring them out to the crowd. 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 have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

## **Sermon**

Let us pray together. Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Well, we come to that glorious time of year, not just Fall, when the leaves turn orange and maroon, but also the beginning of college football season. And so in that spirit, I have an announcement to make. I hereby renounce all my allegiances to Virginia Tech and its football program. I will be selling or giving away all of my memorabilia and all of my orange and maroon clothing. I will now be cheering for the UVA football team.

*Psych!*

That would be shocking if that were true. Wouldn't it be? I shared that opening with my wife yesterday, and like many of y'all, she just laughed. Anyone who knows me, knows that I pretty much bleed orange and maroon, and anyone who knows anything about Virginia Tech and UVA knows that it's not just a rivalry between schools, but it truly comes down to competing allegiances.

Competing allegiances. That's what I want to talk about today. What other competing allegiances do we have in our lives? Those things that get us really fired up when someone takes the other side and starts talking about it? More than just "tomato – tomahto, potato – potahto, let's call the whole thing off." I'm thinking more things like the Washington Redskins versus the Dallas Cowboys. Or maybe Apple versus PC and Android. Or Ford versus Chevy versus Dodge. Or even going so far as buying domestic versus buying foreign.

When we went and bought our first vehicle, and it was the first time I'd purchased a vehicle myself, we went and bought a Toyota Corolla. And my dad about went through the roof, because he had always bought American-made Dodge-Chrysler products. And I said, "But Dad, the Toyota plants are in America. That's where the cars get made. They're employing Americans. And look at Consumer Reports," and all that sort of stuff. Until the point when we got pregnant with Chloe and we were, I thought, in the market for a minivan, but my pregnant wife said, "No, I'm not ready to be a soccer mom yet" – you don't argue with a pregnant woman, and so we got a Highlander. But we went to visit Mom and Dad, and it's night time, and I see this minivan sitting in their driveway. We pull up behind it and it's a Toyota Sienna. I knew that my aunt and uncle had one, or at least one like it, and I thought, "Oh, they're visiting." So I walk in and look around, and I'm like, "Where's Marce and Willie Joe?" They said, "What are you talking about? They're not here." I said, "Well, whose van is that?" And lo and behold, my dad had bought a Toyota.

For followers of Jesus, we live in the midst of competing allegiances every day. Followers of Jesus have been living with this tension since the beginning, as we read in Acts today. We've been journeying through the book of Acts together this summer. This story of how the Holy Spirit moved through the early church and grew them into an ever-growing and expanding movement, following Jesus' directive to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And today we read that Paul and his companions are moving ever westward from what is now modern-day Turkey into the peninsula of what is now, today, Greece. And he goes, as was his custom, first to the synagogue. He was of the Jewish faith and had come to believe in Jesus, and he was a scholar in the Jewish faith. And so whenever he'd go to a new city, he would go first to the synagogue because they already believed in God. They were already waiting for the Messiah. And we read that as was his custom,

he reasoned with them and showed them through what is our Old Testament today how Jesus was indeed the Messiah that they'd been waiting for. And we read that some Jews were persuaded and joined, as well as a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few "prominent" women. You know what that word "prominent" means, right? Especially in that day and time. It meant money. It meant a degree of power, a degree of prestige. And it meant that if these people were being drawn to a different faith, a different way of living out that faith, that their synagogue might lose income. Their synagogue might lose influence in the city. It might certainly lose some of its prestige because these folks might not be coming any more.

We read that other Jews were jealous, so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace. They went and hired a bunch of thugs and formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They got that jealous. And then they tried pinning that on Paul and Silas and Jason and his household, who had given them shelter. But then notice the accusation that they level against Paul and Silas. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus. When they had heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.

Note that they didn't complain, "they're stealing some of our members!" Or "they're stealing some of our money!" The city officials wouldn't have cared about that. But defying Caesar, saying that there is some other king named Jesus – whoa, wait a minute. That's what throws the city officials into turmoil. Because if that makes its way up to Rome, then that means trouble for that city and those city leaders. That means a crackdown by the Roman military moving in, maybe imposing martial law. That means maybe some economic sanctions against the city. Someone's neck was going to be on the line. Someone locally was likely to lose power, so it'd be best to nip this in the bud pretty quick. In other words, they leveled a political accusation.

Paul and Silas were stirring up competing allegiances to competing kingdoms. And these citizens of their fair city who were converting to Jesus, who were changing their beliefs and therefore their allegiances – that was as shocking as me changing from Virginia Tech to University of Virginia. Or my dad buying Toyota instead of Dodge. But even more so; it was alarming because of the impact on that community.

Now before you tune me out – oh boy, he's going political again – recognize that human beings, by nature, we're political. Because whether we realize it or not, at the foundation, politics is not just about how we govern ourselves, but how we conduct ourselves from day to day. And indeed to even choose not to engage in politics as we know it is, in itself, a political stance. And I believe that if the gospel is to advance in our lives as individuals and as a community and as a nation and a world, we learn these lessons from the Book of Acts, that we have to allow the gospel to impact every area of our lives. From the pews to our pocketbooks to politics.

Yet particularly here in America, we don't realize that we live within competing allegiances, because we so often take both for granted. It doesn't often dawn on us on Sunday mornings – I know it hardly ever does with me – when we get up and get ready to go to church, it doesn't often dawn on us that, wow...we live in a country where we have the freedom to choose whether we worship, who we worship, and where we worship.

I love studying US History. So much of what I've been reading and what I've been watching lately asks, "what does it mean to be truly American?" Is it unflinching patriotism and loyalty to the causes of freedom? Or is it exercising our right to question and challenge our government and its authority? Because without both of those, we might still be citizens of the United Kingdom and driving down the wrong side of the road. But yet they seem to be polar opposites sometimes today.

And I bet we could have a lively discussion about that, of what it means to be truly American. But what about this other allegiance? Our allegiance to the kingdom of God? What does it mean to say that earliest affirmation of faith recorded in scripture? "Jesus is Lord." If Jesus is Lord, that means He's in charge. That means He's our ultimate leader. That means we do as He would have us to do. It means whatever elected officials are in power, whether we voted for them or not, take at best a second seat to Jesus. It means that the way we conduct our affairs as individuals, as families, as a church, as a nation, should be in light of that statement, that Jesus is Lord. But I doubt we'd have as robust a conversation about what "Jesus is Lord" means.

What would it mean if we said, "Jesus is Lord" before we made any purchase, large or small? Would it change the way we spend our money? The way we invest? What if we said, "Jesus is Lord" before we went into the voting booth? Would it change how we vote? What if we said, "Jesus is Lord" driving down the road, when a person cuts us off in traffic (yes, I'm preaching to myself on that one)? What does it mean if we live our lives to say, "Jesus is Lord?"

One of the biggest competing allegiances in the technology world is that great debate between Apple versus PC or Android. They had a great series of commercials a while back: "Hi, I'm Mac, and I'm PC." Remember those? And I remember when one of the new iPhones came out a number of years ago, and on launch day I was itching to get my hands on it. I wanted one so bad. And I remember being in K&L Barbecue restaurant up in Hopewell – great place to go eat. And somebody walked in as we were leaving, with the new iPhone. They had it out and they were using it. And this group of strangers, including me, were drawn like magnets, gathered around this person, like, "Do you like it? That looks great," and we were talking. Perfect strangers, we didn't know each other, talking about this thing.

What if we got that fired up about Jesus? What if we got as fired up about Jesus as we do about whether we're Republican or Democrat? What if we got as fired up for Jesus as we do about whether we're Hokies or Hoos or Dukes, or God knows what else? What if we really lived as if Jesus is Lord?

Paul would go on to visit and found a church in Philippi, and he wrote them a letter in which he said, "Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." May that be our aim above all else. Thanks be to God. Amen.