

The newspaper headline blares “Christians causing riots!” The subtitle amplifies that “They are being run out of town after turning the city upside down.”¹ No, this isn't a report on extremists shouting curses at those of a different faith. No, no one picketed a soldier's funeral or vandalized a place of worship.

Incredibly, these Christians considered themselves peacemakers; they did not desire confrontation, they did not try to impose their views by strength of arms nor mass rallies nor the sheer volume of their voices. These were not arrogant religious leaders, confident that their every action displayed their righteousness. These were not political radicals, tired of being oppressed by ridiculous laws imposed by a self-serving majority, seeking their independence or at least freedom.

The story promised to list on an inside page all these uncivil agitators being sought, being deported, for their actions. You hoped to avoid the embarrassment of seeing a friend on that list.

These Christians claimed that working hard just to climb the corporate ladder, to amass power and respect and fortunes, is wrong! They rejected the emphasis on externals, on wealth, vacuous entertainment and the trappings of success. Instead, they called for a focus on finding time to take care of the internals, of finding time away from distractions, and focus upon a relationship with God.

The astute reporter pointed out that they did not mention the importance of education nor a strong defense against evil foreign powers; there is no respect shown for the leadership of the established families nor long standing traditions.

You finally get to the list of trouble makers. Two names jumped out at you, just two names: Paul and Silas. Riots caused by just two Christians. Their ideas, living with a focus on God, were ideas that turned the ancient Greek world upside down. They were not trying to impose the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai for the people of Israel. Rather, they were trying to live, and tell others, of a new law, given on a different mountain, by the new Moses for all the children of God: the Beatitudes.

¹ Acts 17

You put down the paper, wondering.

As we are about to enter Lent, I suggest that we read the paper carefully. Skip the articles about the misdeeds of famous actresses. Ignore all the advertising that focuses on externals: how we look, what we drive, extravagant new homes. Bypass all the suggested ways to spend our excess wealth, be it on exorbitant trips to the edge of space or \$10,000 for a bottle of wine, even \$1000 Super Bowl tickets.

Focus instead on all the articles about Christians turning the world upside down by quietly living and sharing their faith. Find the articles about Christians who have an open hand that gives to the poor. The articles about those with open hearts that share the sorrow of others, mourn for the culture around them, receiving God's comfort. Those with a heart that seeks, and freely gives, mercy; a heart that is overflowing with pure motives and desires. Find the articles about those Christians who have open spirits that are gentle, open spirits seeking God's guidance. Look for the articles that detail Christians with open mouths, mouths that speak words of peace and love rather than war and hate, mouths and souls that hunger and thirst for righteousness. Even look for articles about Christians that are being insulted and persecuted, in this city, because they try to live their faith as if the Kingdom of God has fully arrived.

If you can not find those articles, articles about Christians causing riots, turning the world upside down while seeking God's blessings, perhaps ask "why?"

I wonder if we have we so focused on our independence and freedom, freedom to worship God, that we have missed that it has been redefined as freedom from God, a life independent of God. A freedom to put our selves at the center of the universe, freedom to be comfortable with the culture around us. The Beatitudes call us to place God in the center of our entire lives. They call for us, the citizens of the Kingdom of God "to put God first in [our] motives and actions, in [our] business and language, in [our] thought life and [our] priorities."² We are to seek the deep and enduring joy, the blessings, found only in following Christ.

² Green, Michael, The message of Matthew, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. 2000. pg 89.

Imagine demanding that the Beatitudes, not the 10 Commandments, were posted in every public building? Courtrooms with “Blessed are the merciful;” the Pentagon with “Blessed are the peacemakers?”³ Every church with “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Imagine if all Christians sought to be blessed by living such a life.

Imagine how those blessings would turn our world upside down!

³ Idea based on Kurt Vonnegut essay May 10, 2004 on InTheseTimes.com.