

to figure out what they can do about it, with their hands and feet, even when that action stirs the pot.

Living our faith in public is not only related to how we interact with our laws and government. It may also cause us to go against cultural norms and expectations of society, which are often just as strict. A group of Presbyterians in Western North Carolina have developed a curriculum called Men in the Mirror that they are sharing with their church partners in Malawi and in Nicaragua who have requested it. The study focuses on helping men develop skills of servant leadership focused on humility, rather than an overinflated sense of male superiority. Participants are invited into Christ-like illustrated in scripture, which is also helping them affirm the gifts of women in their families and churches. The men who are engaging in this study are truly challenging societal cues around masculinity, as they learn a completely new way of relating to themselves and the people around them. They are sticking with Christ, even when that requires major changes for how they act in public and in private. These men are courageously turning the world upside down.

I love that phrase. We'll focus on it later using the words of a hymn based on this scripture in our Litany. For me, turning the world upside down conjures up the notion of what Congressman John Lewis said during the Civil Rights era, urging people to get in "good trouble, necessary trouble." Trouble that points to the reality of the promises of scripture and the vision of God's Kingdom taking shape on earth. But I want to be clear that Paul and Silas' actual goal was never to turn the world upside down. They were not aiming to change the status quo, or bring down the government, or create strife in the synagogue. Their only aim was to preach the good news of Jesus Christ out loud. And to invite anyone who heard the news to live into that hope. When they did that, the world was changed. For us, the goal is only to live our faith in Christ boldly, not just spiritually, but also in tangible ways. To live it with total trust in Jesus Christ, above all else. When we do that, then the world around us might just get turned on its head. And perhaps in that turning, the world comes to look more like God's vision for creation. In fact, maybe it will actually look like the world turned right.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Mike Ferguson, "The Rev. Jimmie Hawkins gives Synod School attendees a primer on what Presbyterians don't believe," *Presbyterian News Service*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/the-rev-jimmie-hawkins-gives-synod-school-attendees-a-primer-on-what-presbyterians-dont-believe/>

April 21, 2024
Fourth Sunday in Easter
"A Spirit That Stirs Us Up"
Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Acts 17:1-9 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

I had a good friend in college named Sarah. We used to take power walks around the campus because we were both firm 'anti-runners.' On those walks we'd chat about everything from politics to relationships to the future. Religion and faith often came up. Sarah was somewhat of an atheist, or maybe more agnostic. She knew that I was a person of faith and she respected that. But I'll never forget something she said about that. She was fully supportive of faith, as long as it remained private. She thought religion should only be about personal spirituality. She did not support the expression of faith in the public square. I have no memory of how I actually responded when she said that. Back then, I probably didn't have well-formed ideas on the matter. But I do remember feeling like something about her sentiment was off. Faith is a spiritual, personal matter. But it is not only that.

We hear about some public implications of faith when we meet up with Paul and Silas today. They were sharing the good news of Jesus Christ all the way in Thessalonica, which is in modern day Greece. The message of Christ had already traveled some 1500 miles from Jerusalem, through the teaching and preaching of the first apostles. In the city of Thessalonica though, things got a little hairy. A mob of people, along with some bad actors, got the whole city riled up about what Paul and Silas were teaching. There were some Jewish people upset by the religious implications of their message. But the real accusation was more of a political one. The mob said their preaching about Jesus was "turning the world upside down."

We know that 'all' they were doing was preaching, teaching, and talking about Jesus: about his ministry; what his death and resurrection meant. The charge from the mob was that the apostles were acting contrary to the emperor. They were saying there was another king—a different king—than the emperor. And his name was Jesus. To suggest that there was someone other than the emperor who was the divine one—the rightful ruler—was tantamount to treason.

Which brings us back to the point that faith cannot be not just an internal, private spiritual matter. To trust in Jesus Christ, even a little bit, has public

implications, too. Then and now, when we proclaim *Jesus* as Lord, we are saying that he is the one fully in charge of our lives. That our ultimate faith is in him. That our lives belong to Christ and to God's realm. We do not put our ultimate faith in money or our work. And our love for any tribe or community or country comes second to our love for God.

Last year, the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s advocacy director, Rev. Jimmie Hawkins, gave a talk for a gathering of pastors and church leaders in Iowa. His talk included a list of things that Presbyterians do not believe in. Like reincarnation, being saved by good works, fate, purgatory, the leadership of bishops, and praying to saints. Capping off his list of things we don't believe in was the idea of Christian nationalism. He reminded listeners that Christian nationalism is the idea that patriotism and Christian theology are totally compatible and can be merged into one and the same notion. Rev. Hawkins said, "When there's conflict between the state and the Word of God, we stick with Jesus. We stick with God."¹

If we need a reminder of why clarity around this issue is so important, and why talking about it is relevant today, we can look to our ancestors in faith who lived in Germany in the 1930s. There, as Adolph Hitler consolidated his power, most German Christians took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted. They sat by, or even supported Hitler, as he seized property, tapped telephones, forbade meetings, imprisoned people without trials, and censored publications. A handful of leaders in Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches knew they could not stand by while this was happening. In 1934, they gathered to discuss scripture and to make a stand against this merging of faith and totalitarian governance. They decided to stick with Jesus. The statement they wrote, called the Theological Declaration of Barmen, is included in our historical Presbyterian statements of faith. In it, they said, "As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he also God's mighty claim upon our whole life...We reject the false doctrine of [the so-called German Christians] as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords..."

This is the same as what the apostles were preaching, too, way back in Thessalonica. If Jesus the Christ was truly God, then the emperor could not *also* be god. In that conflict, Paul and Silas, and their friend Jason, too, chose to stick with Jesus. They chose to stick with God, even when it put them at risk. Their statement of faith in Jesus Christ brought comfort, salvation, healing, and grace into their own hearts and lives, just as it does for us. But that faith also had implications for how they lived in public. That faith made a difference to how they interacted with their fellow citizens and their leaders. The mob, wrong as it was to stir up violence, recognized correctly that allegiance to God above all was indeed going to shake up the status quo.

I'll be honest, it's tricky for me to share with you a clear illustration about Christians today sticking with God and turning the world upside down. Because for almost any public issue I talk about, I can be sure there are people seated here, or listening at home, who take all different views of it. What some of you will celebrate as turning the world toward God, others may only see as stirring up trouble. We are so divided politically and socially, that it seems we can only safely talk about the private, personal dimension of our faith. And yet scripture is clear that it is indeed a changed *world* which Jesus came to usher in; a world that looks something like the promises of scripture: a place where justice rolls down like waters; where this is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; a world where there is no mourning or crying or pain. For that to become reality, our faith cannot remain only in our hearts. And so knowing the challenge, I'll take a stab at two ways I see people sticking with Jesus in public, going against the norms of government or society, to turn the world toward God's vision.

A few years ago Presbyterians met in St. Louis at our national gathering called the General Assembly. A goal for the meeting had been to get out of the meeting hall to make a difference in the host city. Organizers that year focused in on Jesus' call to serve those in prison, and they considered the issue of cash bail in the local justice system. With cash bail, when a person is arrested, then their bail is set at a certain dollar amount (often not a huge amount), which will let the person leave the jail and go home to await their court date. The system may be applied evenly, but the result is, of course, much harder on people who are simply poor. And that is often people of color. They cannot put up the cash, often around \$1000, to be able to go home. And so they sit in jail to wait, often for long periods. Which means they may lose their jobs, and there is no one to take care of their kids, who may have to enter foster care. All because they cannot pay. Now, we might say that's the punishment for the crime. But these folks have not been convicted. Shameka Parrish-Wright, who created the Bail Project to try to change this system, was herself arrested after trying to defend herself in a violent altercation with her partner. She had a baby at home, from whom she was separated because she could not pay her \$1000 bail. Even as she knew she would attend her court date and follow through with what the system asked of her.

So in St. Louis, Presbyterians at the meeting contributed \$47,000 at their opening worship service, and then walked downtown to deliver the money at the court. The funds were used to pay the cash bail of incarcerated people who had been pre-screened for release. Many Presbyterians continued this effort to change the cash bail system after they returned home to their own communities. This issue remains a live one, and we know it's thorny at best. But these folks are attempting to stick with Jesus. To notice when a law, legal as it may be, is disproportionately harming some of God's children. And then