



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Complicated People, Complicated Church

Acts 17:1-9

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A couple of years ago, I read an article about a small, California-focused version of the Field Museum in Berkeley, CA. The article explains how different groups of people, with very different world-views and experiences, all came to value this museum as “theirs.” Research scientists interested in ecology and evolution founded this museum. Another woman, who loved to collect and press wildflowers, funded and staffed the museum, and encouraged people with similar interests to contribute specimens. Trappers raised a little money for themselves by contributing animal specimens. California enthusiasts got on board because they wanted to record the disappearing flora and fauna of their state. The University of California administration recognized a good thing when they saw it and supported the museum’s growth. And, of course, visitors of all ages used the museum in a variety of ways. The article explores how all these different stakeholders valued the museum. How did this museum become a space that could hold them together, a space that they could all share and claim and in which they could find significant meaning?<sup>1</sup>

I begin here because I have the same question about the church: how can the church of Jesus Christ can become a space that brings together, and holds together, people from varying social worlds, who have competing self-interests and different searches for meaning in their lives? How can we be that kind of space for the diverse population we seek to serve?

Some scholars suggest that this is exactly the kind of question that Paul must have asked himself 2000 years ago, when he found himself in a city like Thessalonica. Like Chicago and its environs, Thessalonica was a city with lively ethnic diversity: it was peopled not only with old time Thessalonians, but also with Celts, Egyptians, Romans, Italians, and what the politician Cicero had once characterized as “hordes of barbarians.” These immigrants brought their religions with them. In Paul’s day, Thessalonica was a thriving economic and trading center with about 200,000 people, several major religions including Judaism, and a growing number of religious sects from other countries.<sup>2</sup>

It is into this diverse religious and social mix that Paul introduces the good news of Jesus Christ. He is persuasive. He converts some people in the synagogue, a few prominent women, and a larger group of devout Greeks, including a man named Jason.

Who were these people, and why should we care?

During my last few years on the McCormick faculty, I was part of a team that developed a new course for first year students about race, ethnicity, and the church. In preparing the course, I spent a lot of time wrestling with issues of systemic racism, difference and diversity, the segregation of the church, and the imperatives of the gospel. Who does God call us to be as a church? In a divided and unjust world, how can and should the church form a community that reflects the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

<sup>1</sup>Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer. “Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-1939.” *Social Studies of Science* Vol. 19 (1989), 387-420.

<sup>2</sup>E. Randolph Richards. “Ministering in a Tough Place: Paul’s Pattern in Thessalonica.” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 42:1 (September 1999): 18-20.

First United was founded because our predecessor congregations wrestled seriously with these questions fifty years ago, in the context of fair housing legislation. But, just because we wrestled with these questions once, doesn't mean they have disappeared. The world around us continually remakes itself, and we must ask these questions anew in every age and place, and in the presence of new kinds of diversity. Who does God call us to be as a church?

Questions like this turn us back to the scriptures. What might the first century church teach us about God's call? Depending on how they've been interpreted, texts like Acts 17 give us different answers.

One end of the interpretive spectrum emphasizes the unifying power of the gospel. All are one in Christ Jesus. There is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female. Christ has broken down the dividing wall.<sup>3</sup> These are lovely texts, but I have learned that interpreting them as unifying can be problematic, depending on who is doing the preaching. When people who represent the dominant culture preach these texts, unity is often defined on our terms, and consciously or unconsciously, we end up erasing the distinctiveness of people who have been disenfranchised due to race, or gender, or sexual orientation, or levels of ability.

At the other end of the interpretive spectrum are scholars like Eric Barreto, whose work I read as I was preparing to teach this course. Barreto's earliest work explores the ethnic difference and diversity found in the narratives of Acts. Barreto suggests that Paul's ministry was not about unity in the sense of erasing one's old identity and assuming a new, common one. He suggests instead that Paul's ministry was much more about creating a church a little bit like that California museum - a space in which people with quite different identities and self-interests could find common ground. From Barreto's perspective, that common space is constructed not by finding the lowest common denominator among people and going with that but, instead, by recognizing and negotiating the complexity that people bring to the church, in the presence of the risen Christ.<sup>4</sup>

To understand what Barreto means about complexity, let's think about Lydia, a character from Acts 16. She is a professional woman of means. She is from Asia Minor, which means she is an outsider. She is a "devout Greek," a slippery term, according to Barreto, that indicates she is Jewish religiously and a Gentile culturally. It is difficult for us to put Jewish and Gentile together, because we have always been taught that these are two separate populations; but apparently it was not an uncommon occurrence in the first century for people to have these overlapped, ambiguous identities. So, Lydia occupies space in between categories and she exists on the margins.<sup>5</sup>

Lydia is one of many such people we encounter in Acts. Few of them are simple. Many of them, like Timothy and Paul himself, have complicated, layered identities. Barreto argues that Paul wades right into this ethnic ambiguity and constructs a church right smack in the middle of that ambivalent, complex space.

That really got me thinking, because if we minister anywhere in the twenty-first century, we minister in an ambivalent, complex space, full of people with ambivalent and complex identities.

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 2:14.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Barreto. *Ethnic Negotiations: The Function of Race and Ethnicity in Acts 16*. A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in New Testament. 2010

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 166-169.

As an example, let's think about something that I used to think was pretty straightforward: the family. I grew up in the 1950s with Ozzie and Harriet. We knew what a family was. Not anymore. Just think about all the different forms of family life we experience, in addition to the large percentage of people who live by themselves. There is no normal model anymore and people move in and out of living situations, so the shape of family life is in flux, all the time. So how do we do a family ministry? However we do it, it has to be in the middle of the ambiguity and complexity.

And that means that ministry is going to be messy. We see that in Acts. Things blow up in Thessalonica, just as they did in almost every other place Paul ever went. And when things blow up around Paul, they do so around questions of identity: Jew or Gentile, Paul or Apollos, Christ or Caesar. Things blow up because the ambiguity of identity is full of tension and people often want to resolve it by coming down on one side or the other.

But that's not the way God wants us to handle it. God does not call us to turn away from ambiguity. God calls us to plunge deep into places like Thessalonica and Oak Park and our sister communities, where there is plenty of ambiguity and complexity abounds, and people are not simple. People are not just gay or straight. We are not just white or black or brown. We are not just wealthy or poor. We are not just Christian or Muslim, or men or women. We are lots of things, all at once, and sometimes we are in between identities.

Part of what it is to be a church is to make space for all of us, in all our individuality. Church, at its best, is not an exercise in conformity. It's a space where all of us can come alive and in which our gathered body can come alive, too. By the grace of God, the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

In a few moments, we are going to baptize Ben, Sara, and Ava, our newest partners in this journey of faith. Ben, Sara, and Ava, I hope you will find a warm and welcoming church home here. I hope you will find a home in which you can be yourselves:

- a home where you can ask the hard questions that lie deep inside you
- a home in which you can develop the unique gifts that God has given you
- a home where you can find true friends
- a home that will help you live into a life filled with meaning, purpose, and abundance.

I also hope that First United will be for you a church home in which you discover the living Christ, because he is the one who is at the center of this and every church. For many of us, Christ is an elusive presence; he's easy to miss or take for granted. But in my experience, Christ makes himself known in the life of the church, and I think the primary reason I am still part of the church is that I met him here when I was about your age.

May you also encounter the living Christ in your journey of faith, in the company of the church. May your lives be touched with Christ's grace. May you know his forgiveness; you may not need it now, but one day you will. May Christ sharpen your conscience with his compassion for the broken-hearted of the world. Above all, may Christ grant you his peace.

Welcome to this church, which is full of wonderful, complicated people. We look forward to walking with you in our journeys of faith. Amen.