

Acts 19:23-19:41: “Ends” VIII: Return to Ephesus II

Introduction:

Smoky Row!

We're in our second week talking about Paul's time in Ephesus. Last week we looked at Luke's emphasis on the economic effects that the Way, this new Jesus-centered community, is having in Ephesus.

Today's passage is in every way connected to last week's. Remember, Paul is still in Ephesus; He's been there for over two years now, and the Church has grown in number and influence. And the turmoil that the Church has caused society is getting noticed. In an act of total personal conversion and economic disruption, they just burned 127 years' wages worth of sorcerous, cultic scrolls. And about that time something happened. We'll read about it in a moment.

And I don't want to keep using the word disruption, but it's hard not to. Paul's message, and the group that's rallied around it, have started to wreck society. And those who have a vested interest in things staying the way they are do not like this. We'll see that today, and

we'll see what it means to be a cause for others' commotion, to speak or stay silent, and to protect things and people.

First, let's pray.

Prayer:

Thoughtful Assessments: Artemis

Today's passage starts with an incredibly level-headed, reasonable assessment about the implications the growing Church has for the city of Ephesus. A man named Demetrius speaks up, and Demetrius is the guy you want at your corporate vision-planning session, you know? He's a forecaster. He just gets how things will turn out. He's not in any way a model of morality, but he does perceive the future correctly.

We read this:

23 About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. 24 A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. 25 He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said:

First, Artemis.

You've heard of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, right? The Great Pyramid of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Alexandria's Lighthouse, and four others. One of those was the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus. This temple was a huge, huge deal. And Artemis worship was a huge, huge deal; she was one of the most widely worshipped ancient Greek gods. Many greek goddesses were associated with her, almost as an alternative form of her. Cynthia, Phoebe, Hekate. In the Roman pantheon, she was called Diana. She was a huntress, a goddess of fertility, childbirth, wisdom, bears, nature, hills, all sorts of things. Greek myths presented Artemis as a virgin, which was probably directly threatened by the truth in the Christmas story. Super popular, super integrated into Greek society, and incredibly important in Ephesus, particularly, because, as we see in this passage, an entire industry was built up around Artemis' Temple and Artemis worship. This was why people went to Ephesus: To see the temple, to worship Artemis, to bring home a pile of little Artemis statues for the fam. In the temple was what most scholars think was a meteorite, one that was considered an, oh, icon, a

sacred representation of Artemis herself.

Thoughtful Assessments: Threat Level: Midnight
Demetrius brings together all the tradesman who have a vested economic interest in Artemis' worship and Artemis trade. He says this:

“You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. 26 And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. 27 There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

When you only make two points, it is hard to know which is the most important, the first or the last. We read this and as politically jaded as we are, we can't help but think that what bothers Demetrius most is the threat to the Artemis industry. But we know that in the world Paul lived in there was no separation between

“church and state,” that politics and religion and economics were interwoven. We can take a charitable stance toward Demetrius, and assume that he does worship Artemis, care about this goddesses esteem, and not just his own bottom-line. Just like we know people who have no separation between their work and their faith, who believe that what they do they legitimately do for Jesus, maybe that’s how Demetrius rolls. That said, he calls the meeting with those who are economically dependent upon the system in play, not, say, the civic or religious leaders. So. You can decide what motivates him more, I guess.

Ra-Ra-Riot! To The Theater

This group of tradesmen who are dependent upon Artemis and all her worship, they can’t believe what they’re hearing. Here’s how they respond when they hear Demetrius’ claims:

...they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” 29 Soon the whole city was in an uproar.

You imagine them just chanting this, you know? Yelling. And people come running, and then it’s-- however you picture some huge protest or riot, that’s

what this is.

They grab two of the men who came with Paul when he arrived in Ephesus. Gaius and Aristarchus. There's a crowd now, mostly tradesmen, but everyone who's gotten caught up in the scene or their anger. They rush into "the theater," and picture one of those famous Roman amphitheatres. This is a mob, remember. And at least some of them are gathering for a reckoning against their enemies. Paul wants to be there; but the Church bars his way, prevent him. Luke writes, "Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater."

They've occupied the amphitheater. Things are nuts. And if this isn't a description of a mob, what is? We read:

32 The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.

Ra-Ra-Riot! Gentile Nationalism On A City Level
Some of the Jewish believers--maybe--try to engage the crowd and tradesmen, which are entirely gentiles.

Because, while it wasn't totally uncommon for a Gentile to become a god-fearer, it was even less common for a Judean to worship a Greek god. They choose Alexander as their voice, but it doesn't go well:

33 The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. 34 But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

What we have to see here is how economic pressures have launched them into racial violence, and racial violence has always more or less been religious violence when it comes to Jewish and Gentile issues. This is racism, in play, launched by economic fears. It's Gentile Nationalism on a city level.

The mob is silencing Alexander because he is Jewish. They can't believe he can be for Ephesus if he's not for Artemis. They don't believe he's worth hearing if he's not passing their purity tests. If he's not a Gentile, Artemis-worshipper, then as far as the mob is concerned, he's not one of them. But he is one of

them. He lives in Ephesus. This is his home.

It will take you two minutes to find people in America who believe the same thing. That unless you're white and Christian, you don't belong here, you don't have a voice, you out to be shouted down. Or at least, you ought to be on a watch-list someplace. But there's a reason that the Brethren have long supported a separation between the Church and the State. It's because they suffered under a Church-controlled State at their beginning, were persecuted and terrorized in the same way, in this moment, Alexander, Gaius, Aristarchus are being man-handled. But the idea that loyalty to a place requires anything other than loyalty to a place--some identity-based characteristic, like race, or religion, or language--is simply a lie. Every society--city or state or territory--should try to approximate Revelation's vision of the way every tongue, tribe, and nation worship God in a valid, authentic way. And we do that by ensuring no racial, religious, or linguistic test determines national loyalty now. To protect that is, I think, a Christian mandate.

And frankly, it's not entirely clear that Alexander is a Christian. Which is powerful to consider, because it would mean that the synagogue, in this moment, has

tried to support Gaius and Aristarchus and Paul, even though they know the Church is bleeding and will continue to bleed people from them, promote what they consider blasphemy and lies. The synagogue could be stepping in here, on behalf of the Church, when they have nothing to gain at all by doing it, and in fact only something to lose.

Simmer Down!

But the city clerk--who is more than, you know, a cashier, but really someone who was responsible for law and order, along with all the record-keeping that law and order demands--he does have a voice, one that the Ephesians won't deny, and so he speaks up. He realizes that if things don't settle down as soon as possible, Ephesus will get attention that they don't want. He tries to talk down the crowd, asking them to be reasonable. And in a really, really rare event in human history, it works!

35 The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Fellow Ephesians, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? 36 Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm

down and not do anything rash. 37 You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. 38 If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. 39 If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. 40 As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.” 41 After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

Conclusions: Using Our Voices

There are so many things to say about this passage. First of all, let's just point out: If you've got a voice, and influence, and you can use that to calm down a mob and save some people, do it.

That sounds silly, but think: Does what you post, what you say, what you promote on your bumper sticker or yard sign, is it fodder for angry mobs seeking retribution or the punishment of others? Is it reasonable, and talks down irrationality? Does it work

against issues of racial, religious, or linguistic loyalty tests? Or does it promote them?

Conclusions: Rabble-Rousing

In today's passage we see something we've seen over and over and over. Christianity is basically a threat to the status quo, and this is especially the case when politics, and economics, and religious are linked up. And this is simply because we can't easily get Jesus to bless any economic, political, or religious system.

And while now and then Christianity has been beholden to politics, religion, or economics, the Church has always had some part that has resisted this in one way or another. Our task, I think, is to at least listen to those Christian voices that point out the failures of society, because while they may not be all that faithful themselves, they may have something accurate to say about the way the system, the man, the establishment is failing people who God made and loves and sustains with common graces. The Way of Christ and the Way of the world don't often align, and that's true in areas much wider than personal morality.

Are we comfortable with how disruptive and radical Christianity has always been, and will still be?

Conclusions: Protecting Things

I'm struck in today's passage by how much protecting goes on, some of it selfless, some of it not. We can move backward. The clerk seeks to protect the peace of the city, and with it his own job. He wants to protect the city from the attention of the authorities.

Alexander wants to protect Gaius and Aristarchus. His community--jewish and maybe synagogue, maybe Church--wants to protect them, too.

Paul's friends want to protect him, even as he wants to intervene (and so protect) his friends.

Demetrius, and with him the whole cohort of tradesmen, want to protect first their industry, their livelihoods, and secondly, the honor of Artemis, and by extension, Ephesus itself.

Not all of these urges are wrong. But they can lead us to consider things:

Who or what do you want to protect right now? Who or what do you want to protect right now? Some person? Some group? Some institution or tradition? What are

you out to protect? And once we have that in hand, what is motivating us? Fear of retribution, like the clerk? Selflessness, like Alexander and his community? A desire to help, like Paul? Fear of loss of livelihood, wealth, or status, like the tradesmen and Demetrius?

What does our motivation reveal about our relationship with God?

Final Conclusion:

The stories of the early Church that most linger are the ones that are most multivalent. That is, they have more than one application, more than one way of saying what they mean, of bridging the gap between our moment and that moment we're looking at.

Today's passage is full of protection, and we're invited to consider what we protect and why. It reveals Christianity as a force society responds to with anxious fear, and we're invited to consider what we think Christianity is for, and why. It reveals how important it is to use the voice we have for good, and we're invited to consider when we communicate and why.

I like today's passage, because it will linger even after this sermon's long forgotten. So, say, 20 minutes. Consider it again sometime.

Extra: Conclusion: It's the economy!

And while the Church in today's passage gets in trouble for all sorts of reasons, the riots start because of the economic threat the Way is posing to Ephesus. The Church poses an economic threat to the way of life of Ephesus. Luke makes it clear from the start that following Jesus has not just personal financial implications but will have, as the Church gains influence and importance, wider economic impacts. The Ephesians sense this, and want to respond before things get worse.

Let's just keep our eyes open to the way in which economic concerns drive people to do, as the clerk points out today, unreasonable, ridiculous things. If we, as the Church, can intervene with reason, with constructive help when people are facing economic anxiety, then we can bring peace before war breaks out, we can stave off terror before it's been made manifest. And the truth is that while our influence in the world is waning, it's not gone by any measure.