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Acts 19:23-41
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Riot in Ephesus

There is a friendly—okay, maybe not so friendly—debate between Seattle Seahawks fans and San Francisco 49ers fans about which team is best. So imagine with me how a Seahawks fan might try to convince a 49ers fan to repent of their ways and become part of the 12th Man.

You could walk into a 49ers game dressed head-to-toe in blue and green, surrounded by a sea of red and gold, and announce, "Your team stinks! You should root for winners, not losers!"

I'm guessing that probably wouldn't win you many converts.

You could try statistics. You could pull out the record books and explain why the Seahawks are clearly the superior organization. That might convince one or two people.

Or you could let the two teams play and let people decide for themselves.

Imagine, over time, that more and more people start switching allegiances. People begin trading in their red and gold jerseys for blue and green.

Now imagine the people who make those red and gold jerseys watching all of this happen.

Their sales are dropping.

Their profits are disappearing.

And pretty soon the head of the 49ers merchandising department stands up in the stadium and says, "This isn't just about football! These Seahawks people are destroying our way of life!"

And before you know it, the crowd is chanting, "Beat Seattle! Beat Seattle!"

Eventually, you have yourself a full-blown riot.

Because now it isn't really about football anymore.

It's about identity.

It's about family traditions. Childhood memories. Community. Money. Pride. Loyalty. And the fear that everything you have known and loved is being taken away.

That is pretty much what happens in our Scripture lesson today.

As we saw last week, Paul's preaching in Ephesus was changing people's lives. People were abandoning magic and the occult. They were turning away from idols. They were putting their faith in Jesus. And when people's lives began to change, the culture around them began to change. That is when the trouble started.

Please join me as we hear from Acts 19:23-41.

23 About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. [The Way was one of the earliest names for the followers of Jesus and the Way was creating quite a disturbance.] **24** A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. **25** These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. **26** You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. **27** And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her."

28 When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" **29** The city was filled with the confusion, and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travel companions. **30** Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; **31** even some officials of the province of Asia who were friendly to him sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater. **32** Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. **33** Some of the crowd gave instructions to Alexander, whom the Jews had pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. **34** But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" **35** But when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Citizens of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven? **36** Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. **37** You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. **38** If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. **39** If there is anything further you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. **40** For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." **41** When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination

Ephesus was one of the great cities of the ancient world. And at the center of Ephesus was the Temple of Artemis. Artemis was a tremendously popular goddess throughout the Mediterranean world. In the Roman world she was also associated with Roman goddess Diana. She was connected with fertility, childbirth, hunting,

and the natural world. And Artemis was not some minor local deity. She was a big deal.

Here is a picture of a statue of Artemis. She was carved out of wood and then covered with silver.

Her temple was enormous—one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. People traveled from all over the region to worship there. Here is a picture of what archeologists suppose what her temple might have looked like in Paul's day.

There were festivals, athletic competitions, theater productions, parades, and celebrations. And, of course, there was merch. Merchanise. Can you imagine the gift shops? "Welcome to Ephesus! Would you like a small Artemis statue? Perhaps a medium? Or if you really want to impress your neighbors, we have the deluxe model!" People would take these little silver images home and place them in their household shrines.

And there were people making a very good living selling them.

Enter Demetrius. Luke tells us that Demetrius was a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis. And Demetrius gathers the other craftsmen together and basically says: "Guys, we have a problem. That strange guy Paul is preaching. People are listening. People are changing. And if people stop believing in Artemis, they are going to stop buying our Artemis statues. And if they stop buying our statues, we don't make money."

So Demetrius wraps his economic concern in religious language. He says: "This isn't just about our business. This is about the glory of Artemis!"

Well, sure. It's amazing how often our personal interests can suddenly become a matter of sacred principle.

Demetrius knows exactly how to stir up the crowd. He exaggerates Paul's influence. He says Paul has persuaded "large numbers of people" not only in Ephesus but throughout the entire province of Asia.

And suddenly everyone is angry. They begin shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" For two hours. Two hours! Do you think the Gospel has touched nerve? Can you imagine being the guy sitting next to you saying, "So…how long do you think we're going to do this?" The whole city is in an uproar.

And here is the really interesting part. Verse 32 says: "Some were shouting one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together."

Think about that. Most of them didn't even know why they were there! They just got caught up in the crowd. Someone got angry. Someone else got louder. False truths were exaggerated. Pretty soon everybody was shouting. And nobody really knew what was going on.

Sound familiar? January 6th, 2021?

The interesting thing about this story is that Paul never organizes an attack on the Temple of Artemis. He doesn't form a protest movement. He doesn't stand outside the temple with a bullhorn. He doesn't say, "Let's take over Ephesus!" He simply preaches Jesus. For two years, Paul teaches in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. People listen. People encounter Jesus.

And slowly, quietly, their lives begin to change. They stop practicing magic. They stop worshiping idols. They stop trusting things they have made with their own hands. And they begin trusting Jesus. That is the power of the Gospel.

The Gospel doesn't always change a culture through a political revolution. Sometimes it changes a culture one life at a time. One heart at a time. One family at a time. One habit at a time. And eventually, when enough people are changed, the culture begins to change too.

That is what frightened Demetrius. Because when Jesus changes people, the things that once controlled them begin to lose their power.

And that brings us to an important question: What would happen if Jesus really changed the way we live? What industries would be threatened? What habits would be disrupted? What things that we currently consider normal would suddenly become unnecessary?

One example that comes to mind is pornography and the commercial sex industry. We live in a culture where pornography is incredibly accessible. We don't have to travel anywhere. We don't have to go into a store. We don't even have to leave our bedroom.

It's right there in our pockets. And that is part of what makes this issue so difficult.

But imagine what would happen if millions of people truly encountered Jesus and simply stopped consuming pornography. Think about the billions of dollars involved. There would be an economic earthquake.

And that is exactly the kind of thing Demetrius understood. When people's lives change, industries can change.

But I don't want us to hear this sermon and think, "Well, this is about pornography, and I don't have that problem, so I'm good." Because the issue in Acts 19 is much bigger than pornography.

The issue is idolatry. An idol is anything that takes the place of God. Anything that captures our hearts, our attention, our trust, our time, or our identity more than Jesus does.

For some people, it's pornography. For others, it's alcohol. For others, it's money. For others, it's success. For others, it's politics. For others, it's power. For others, it's approval. For others, it's control. For others, it's simply being busy enough that we never have to sit quietly with God.

We all have our Artemis. And sometimes our idols are not bad things. That's what makes them so dangerous. Work is not bad. Money is not bad. Sex is not bad. Power is not bad. Family is not bad. Politics is not inherently bad. Success is not bad. But when a good thing becomes the ultimate thing, it becomes an idol.

And idols always make promises they cannot keep. They promise happiness. They promise to make us feel good. They promise security. They promise significance. They promise control. And then they slowly begin to control us.

So how do we break free?

Well, the first step is honesty. We have to admit that something has a hold on us. We have to bring it into the light. We have to stop pretending that we can manage it by ourselves. We have to acknowledge that freedom can only come with God's help. And we need other people.

If we are struggling with an addiction, let's not go at it alone. Find someone to trust. Confess it. Ask for accountability. Seek professional counseling when needed. Get connected with people who understand what we're going through. There are churches and ministries that offer programs like Celebrate Recovery that help people deal with addiction and destructive patterns through the power of Christ.

Because the goal isn't simply to stop doing something. The goal is to become someone new. Paul says to the Romans: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."[1]

Paul says to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me."[2]

That is what Jesus does when he lives in us. He renews our minds. And when our minds begin to change, our desires begin to change. And when our desires change, our habits begin to change. And when our habits change, our lives begin to change.

It is a process. It usually doesn't happen overnight. But it happens.

And for those who love someone struggling with addiction, the same principles apply. Listen before lecturing. Do not shame them. Remember how Jesus never condemned the woman caught in the act of adultery, but he did tell her to leave her life of sin.[3] Pray for them. Offer support and accountability. Get help as well. Because addiction doesn't just affect the person who is struggling. It affects everyone who loves them.

And healing takes time. Rebuilding trust takes time.

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[1] Romans 12:1-2

[2] Galatians 2:20

[3] John 8:11

The Gospel my friends is a Gospel of freedom and forgiveness. Paul says to Galatians: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."[4] Freedom. That's what Jesus offers. Not simply forgiveness for the past, but freedom for the future.

And that brings us back to Ephesus. The riot finally ends when the town clerk stands up and basically says: "Everybody calm down." He reminds them that there are courts and proper ways to settle disputes. And then he says something rather humorous: "We are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." In other words: "Everybody go home before we all get arrested." And the crowd leaves. The riot is over.

But the question remains for us: What is our Artemis? What is the thing that has gotten such a grip on our hearts that we can't imagine living without it? What is the thing we are afraid to surrender to Jesus?

Maybe it is pornography. Maybe it is alcohol. Maybe it is money. Maybe it is our career. Maybe it is our reputation. Maybe it is our need to be in control. Maybe it is our political or sexual identity. Maybe it is our resentment. Maybe it is our need to be right. Maybe it is something else entirely.

I once knew someone who said she knew she had a problem with alcohol and cigarettes when she knew exactly where those things were, but couldn't remember where she had put her Bible. That's a pretty good test.

The good news of the Gospel is that we are not left to fight our idols by ourselves. The same Spirit who lived in Jesus lives in us. The same Spirit who transformed the people of Ephesus is still transforming people today. The same Spirit who helped people walk away from Artemis can help us walk away from whatever has taken Artemis' place in our lives.

So perhaps the question for us this morning isn't: "What's wrong with everybody else?"

Perhaps the question is: "Jesus, what are you asking me to surrender?" What is one step the Spirit of Jesus is calling us to take?

Is it to confess something? Is it to ask for help? Is it to forgive someone? Is it to put down the phone? Is it to stop hiding? Is it to seek counseling? Is it to establish some accountability? Is it simply to spend more time with Jesus?

Whatever it is, let's take the step. Because we don't have to be controlled by our idols.

Demetrius doesn't get the final word. Artemis doesn't get the final word. Our addictions don't get the final word. Our past doesn't get the final word.

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[4] Galatians 5:1

Jesus does. And Paul reminds us: “He who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”[5]

Turn to your neighbor and say, “Neighbor, I am a mess. I know I can’t fix myself. But I believe Jesus can.”

So let’s listen to God. Not Demetrius. Not the crowd. Not the voices telling us that we can never change.

Let’s listen to Jesus. Because the Way of Jesus is the way of freedom.

Amen!

[5] Philippians 1:6