

At Odds
By Rev. Todd Farnsworth
Acts 17: 1-9



When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving

that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. 4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

5 But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.[a] 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, 7 and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” 8 When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. 9 Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

Paul was at odds with the leaders in the synagogue. He stepped into their turf and began teaching that Jesus was the Messiah. The language in this morning’s reading is a little tricky. Some translations note that Paul went to the synagogue and “argued” with the people worshipping. Other translations

read that he was “explaining and proving” in the synagogue. In any case, Paul was making a case for Jesus being the One who they should gather around and worship.

I imagine that for some of the religious, this was blasphemy. They had been taught that there was only one true God to worship, and here was this zealot straight out calling Jesus “God.” It must have felt like a throwback to polytheism, something to be rejected, and yet, *“Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.”*

Paul was at odds with the Roman government. By proclaiming Jesus as his Lord, Paul was teaching that the Emperor held less power than Jesus. Paul was advising the people in the synagogue to rally behind Jesus instead of the Roman government. In truth, the budding faith tradition around Jesus was not large enough to pose what the government would consider a serious threat, but the folks who disagreed with Paul used this “fly in the ointment” to stir up trouble. *They rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.*^[a] *6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, 7 and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”*

All over the world! Ha, they had no idea!

We don't know too much about Jason, except that he was an early convert from Judaism to Christianity. He is listed among the 70 disciples sent out to share the Good News of Jesus with the world. As an early convert, he had learned well from his teacher, possibly Jesus, possibly Paul, to speak the truth and trust the Spirit. This past week his memory was lifted up in the Greek Christian tradition. Jason was celebrated as someone who, being at odds with authority, put him in peril, and caused a king to convert to Christianity when he witnessed Jason's faith and the power of Jesus Christ.

I tell you these things because I believe that "being at odds" has a bad reputation. It is often seen as combative or an act of hostility. The folks in the synagogue who didn't like what Paul was saying certainly cast his actions as hostile...but that was projection. They were projecting their own hostility on to what Paul considered an act of love. He wanted the people who he was with to experience the love that he had and was experiencing in Jesus. And yes, he was passionate about it...but passionate and antagonistic are different things.

As Christians, we have a truth that is often at odds with our culture.

We have a spirit that is often at odds with our government.

At odds doesn't necessarily mean anger or hatred...it can mean that we have our oars in the water and are pulling in a particular direction that is guided by Jesus...that is lead by the calling to love God first and our

neighbor as ourselves. That is guided by the calling to care for the “least of these,” the people in our community who are most overlooked and underserved. If you distill it, *our* “at odds” is about doing love and justice in the spirit of Jesus.

This past week our Moderator and I sent a letter to the Church Council requesting a conversation of love and justice about how to proceed in the midst of this pandemic that is upon us. The conversation was catalyzed by my request that the leadership of our church *plan...plan* to hold all activities online or with social distancing, at least until after Christmas. I am not saying that we *will* have to hold all activities online til then; there may be a miraculous discovery of a vaccine or enough testing may become available to shift our expectations; I am saying that I would like us to *plan* as if that miracle will not happen.

I tried getting some guidance from the NY conference of the UCC and they have since provided some nuts and bolts kind of suggestions for how we can get back to being face to face.

I was made aware of a document created by the Wisconsin Council of Churches that has a more global approach to questions we can ask and benchmarks we can look for to faithfully get back together. As I stated a few weeks ago in a sermon entitled [Acceptance](#), I believe that our getting back together will look different than what we have known in the past. It will be at odds with how we understood church before COVID-19...but *different* is not necessarily bad, just as *at odds* is not necessarily contrary. The *at*

odds I am suggesting is an act of love that is independent to the whims of government and economic advisors throwing us back together, and is based in our faith in Jesus Christ to love God and one another, seeking justice for all...as we declare in our Statement of Open and Affirming when we proclaim: *'Together we will continue to build a safe place and welcoming community for all who seek to love God, neighbor, and self, as Jesus taught.'*

I expect that we will grieve some of the ways we used to do things. We will miss the patterns that once reflected who we were. As sadness arises, we will pray together and work together to heal. I have faith that through God's loving Spirit, we can always heal.

We are blessed to have a Moderator such as Martha Yergau and in her note to the Council she wisely states:

As I have said to several people, one of the things that has been so very difficult and stressful during these past 6-8 weeks has been the uncertainty. The "Not Knowing" weighs heavily on us all and stymies our ability to plan, to dream, to visualize what's ahead. The goal of these documents is to help us at BCC do exactly that - plan with the knowledge of what is likely to be happening in the foreseeable future. Does this mean that we are locked in to these plans? Absolutely not! We can easily return to weekly church services, social gatherings, Committee and Board meetings, choir rehearsals and Rummage planning. What is not as easy to do quickly is to

plan how to shape our church life going forward in a safe and appropriate manner with the on-going health considerations.

This coming Thursday night we will hold a Church Council meeting via zoom to begin these conversations. I will provide some more thoughts to the Council at that time and we will, as our church does, listen carefully to one another and respond in faith. We will send out the link to the meeting as it is a public event, but only Council members will be able to vote on any matters that may come to vote.

Our faith is about love and justice. That is not always the easiest path to travel. Sometimes, those things are at odds with the people around us. Like Paul and Silas, like Jason and the many women who were converted to Christ, being *at odds*, in this case, is OK. May God be with us as we head out onto this new road in Jesus' direction. *'Together we will continue to build a safe place and welcoming community for all who seek to love God, neighbor, and self, as Jesus taught.'*

Amen.