

February 25, 2007  
What Is Your North Star?  
Acts 19:21-20:6

By the look of things, I don't think Paul could have been elected Mayor of Ephesus, probably not even Dog-catcher! For two years Paul had been teaching and preaching that God had entered the world through the person of Jesus. Paul taught that Jesus had modeled a life of sacrifice and service. If a person wants to know how God intended for us to live, Paul believed, he should look at the way Jesus lived his life. Obviously, not everyone was thrilled with this message. The teachings of Jesus are quite revolutionary: to love your enemies, to turn the other cheek if someone strikes you, to forgive a person an unlimited number of times, to return evil with good. These teachings had left the people in Ephesus scratching their heads and searching their hearts. "Who can live like this? Why, living these principles out in the real world would be the death of us." The entire course of Jesus' life ran contrary to the self-centeredness and selfishness that marks the ways of the world. Paul was boldly proclaiming these teachings day after day, and what's more, people were actually deciding to follow Jesus. And as a result Luke notes "there arose a great disturbance about the Way" (v. 23). People were following the way of Jesus and the "whole city was in an uproar" (v.29). The word "uproar" means that the people were confused. Paul's preaching was causing people to think.

Without doubt Paul's preaching presented a big problem. The way of Jesus runs counter to the prevailing culture, not just Paul's culture but any culture, including ours. And the Chamber of Commerce was not in the least happy about this turn of events. If people followed the way of Jesus, the entire economic system would have to be changed. Demetrius, the leader of the Ephesus Chamber of Commerce, was fit to be tied because Paul was convincing people that their little "man-made gods are no gods at all." (v. 26)

For generations Ephesus was known for its image of the Greek goddess Artemis. Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Many scholars think that it was a meteorite that had fallen near the city of Ephesus, but the Ephesians thought that the strange looking structure had all the hallmarks of a feminine fertility goddess and consequently worshipped the strange object. Demetrius and other silver-smiths fashioned small replicas of this object and sold them to tourists or other devotees of Artemis. But now Paul was teaching that there is but one God and he is not made by man. It wasn't the Almighty who Demetrius and his colleagues were agitated about; it was the almighty dollar that consumed them. Simply put, Paul's preaching was costing the businessmen money.

There are probably a lot of us in this room who don't really understand what all the fuss was about. So what? So Demetrius crafted small silver images of the Greek god Artemis. They might be cute on a key chain or to take home as a souvenir to show the kids. Why make such a big deal over such a silly object? Idol worship seems rather harmless, really. I'm not so sure if idols are all that harmless, whether they are of the Ephesian kind or the American kind. Idols have a way of replacing what is truly of value in our lives—our families, our faith. Idol worship may start out as just fun but gradually we are transformed into our idol. What we devote ourselves to is what we become. When a person creates an idol out of a thing or even an ordinary human being they take on the characteristics of that to which they are devoted.

Eventually, idol worship results in self-worship. That may seem like a rather strong and indelicate way of putting it, especially in our modern world so appreciative of tolerance and open-mindedness. Nevertheless, idol worship is just an extension of the self. Whether it is the golden calf that Israel fashioned or the modern icons of today, like athletes, movie stars and famous people, the addiction to anything or any person other than God is in reality just a form of self-worship.

That we live in an age of narcissism or self-love needs hardly to be debated. The pharmaceutical companies would probably go bankrupt if it weren't for the drugs being produced to aid in everything from weight loss to improving sex life. Our entire lives are built around pleasure from the kind of cars we drive to the homes we dwell in to the clothes we wear and even to the foods we eat. Few would argue that we have fulfilled our constitutional duties by "pursuing happiness" with great gusto. No civilization in history has ever pursued pleasure as has ours. Can you imagine if a preacher started telling people that we didn't need sex pills and sleep pills and diet pills and fiber pills and pills for excess gas? And then there are nose jobs and tummy tucks and well, you know, that "augmentation stuff." One pop star has had over seventeen operations trying to look more "god-like." The worship of the self is big business in our culture.

But the more a person focuses on himself, the more he loses his identity. Ironically, self-worship leads to a personal hell. Mentioning names would serve little purpose today, but scan the papers or the internet and observe the celebrities who have lost themselves by becoming self-absorbed. Long ago Jesus said that the secret to abundant life is in losing your life for my sake and the gospel. If you live only to discover yourself, you will only end up losing your identity. But if you invest your life, spend it in the pursuit not of happiness but in sacrifice and service, you will discover yourself.

Goethe wrote one of the great works of modern literature in the story of *Faust*. Faust sold his soul to the devil in exchange for having all his desires met. Power, fame, wealth, sex, everything he desired was his. But, amazingly, the more his pleasures became reality, the more unhappy he grew. Is this not a parable of modern times? Have we not had our desires met in almost every conceivable way, yet are we not still profoundly disillusioned with life? Pleasures alone do not lead to a fulfilled and happy life. Experts have called us the "Prozac Generation."

There are those who have said "No" to our generation of pleasure seekers, and in turning their backs on a hedonistic lifestyle, they have discovered what so many have lost: self. At the age of fourteen Andrea Jaeger was ranked number two in the world in women's tennis. People were shocked when she suddenly quit the sport. I heard her interviewed this week as she worked in a hospital caring for children with terminal cancer. She confessed that she did not miss tennis. Yes, she may have been a great player, but she was more fulfilled helping great kids to live with severe illnesses. She gave up millions of dollars in order to spend her life as a nun caring for sick children. In losing her life, she found it. Wow!

You may not be called to be a nun, but there are countless ways to say “No” to a life of self-centeredness. You may volunteer to work at a hospital or visit a nursing home on a regular basis. You may choose to tutor kids at a nearby school. You can fix a meal for someone who is going through a tough time. Just writing a card of encouragement can mean a lot to a person facing a difficult issue. Do the things Jesus would do if he were you.

Paul’s antidote for so much of the modern depression doesn’t include medication—follow the Way of Jesus. Paul’s identity was all wrapped up in Christ. “To live,” he said, “is Christ.” “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus,” he wrote. “I am crucified with Christ,” he unashamedly cried. Paul’s entire life was centered and focused, not on himself, but on Christ. And what a life he lived. Traveling the world over, telling people about Jesus, making sacrifices and encountering dangers but through it all he said, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things, I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8). That word *rubbish* is a pretty strong word. It might be a little offensive if I translated what the NIV interpreters have stated euphemistically. But this is not Paul’s word; this is God’s word and God says in his word that all things set next to Christ, well, “It’s all crap.”

Luke leaves little telltale signs all over his book concerning Paul’s focus on Christ. In verse 21 the NIV adds that “Paul decided to go to Jerusalem.” In the Greek text, however, the verse reads literally, “Paul *in the Spirit* went to Jerusalem.” The phrase “in the Spirit” helps us to see that Paul lived with a God-consciousness throughout his life. And his intentional effort to follow Jesus allowed Paul to discover himself and live with unspeakable joy. The word *joy* punctuates the writings of Paul again and again. “The Kingdom of God is *joy*,” Paul writes. “Rejoice in the Lord,” he writes, “again I say rejoice.” “But the fruit of the Spirit is *joy*,” Paul sings. If you want to know real *joy*, then discover what it means to be human by following Jesus Christ.

For millennia seafaring people have navigated by the North Star. Because the North Star is a fixed point in the heavens, sailors or for that matter anyone who was lost could determine their whereabouts by locating the North Star. Everyone needs a North Star--a guiding light that gives direction. A fixed point which guides, leads and directs. That fixed point for Paul was Jesus Christ. How about for you? Will you allow Christ to be your North Star? Follow Christ. Say “No” to the ways of the world and you will discover a richer and a more meaningful life. Amen.