

May 15, 2022
Acts 16:16-34
Disruptions that Change Our Frame
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One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’ The crowd joined in attacking them and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

How many of you here today are aware that the technology exists right now to completely convert our society from gasoline powered automobiles to electric in a way that is affordable to everyone with only one change in our current driving habits – a change that would actually do more to connect us on long trips while saving money and cutting back on the use of petroleum? Have you heard of this? It’s called communal driving. How many of you here today were aware of this?

People with electric cars can now join a coop and with the use of an app can trade the use of their cars for long trips to save the time of recharging.

My guess is that if you are over 40, you probably haven’t heard about it. But chances are if you were born roughly between 1985 and 2005 you have. Because, well, you are a Millennial and it’s

millennials who by and large are changing the way we do everything – from how we travel to how one makes a living.

At least that is according to David John Seel, Jr. in his book about the church and Millennials. (“The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church”).

Seel puts forth convincing evidence that this cohort’s experience of the world has shaped them in some interesting ways that *put* them in a position to change the world – which they are doing – not front and center but behind the scenes. As the institutions of the world seem to have slowly been edging towards a precipice, a quiet revolution has been taking place.

Remember the age of this cohort, somewhere between mid-teens and mid-thirties and consider this: the news about priests sexually abusing children and having it covered up by bishops and cardinals first broke when the oldest ones in this cohort were toddlers. Today, 30 years later, there are still thousands of priests and those who covered for them that have yet to be held accountable.

In their life-time bi-partisanship in government has been non-existent. They have only witnessed the blatant partisanship and hypocrisy of a congress that puts party power before the good of the country and presidents who act as if the rules everyone else is bound to follow don’t apply them.

In addition, their experience of “free” market capitalism is one in which companies like facebook, with no remorse whatsoever, sells out the American people to the Russians *and* bids out the most private things about them for a few bucks apiece. Yes, their experience of capitalism is a US banking and investment system that is so reckless in its greed that it came close in 2008 to crashing the world economy. And yet few, if any of these people in power or at the top were or are ever held accountable for their destructiveness – from the corporate pirates who got to keep what they made off of bad mortgages, to crooked and deeply corrupt government officials who turned the other way for power and money. Yes, Facebook once got fined 5 billion but what is 5 billion when you are worth half a trillion?

For the first time ever, it is highly unlikely that most in my children’s generation, playing by the rules of the status quo with such monumental failures at the top, will ever fare as well as their parents did economically.

On the one hand, the Millennial’s experience is that the great institutions don’t really work. But on the other hand, they have all of the information in the world as well a way to reach that world at their fingertips. (Hold up a phone). And they are using that information to creatively make a way for themselves that is defying the status quo.

For instance, using the internet, my son Carl has discovered a way to get paid to do what he loves more than anything – backpacking over the country’s major trails. His goal this year has been to hike 11,000 miles – the most ever hiked in a year by any individual. Beginning at Key West Florida on New Year’s Day this year, he began his trek. He has hiked the length and width of that state, across southern Alabama to Georgia where he began the Appalachian Trail. Next

week sometime, he hopes to enter Maine. When he finishes that trail, he plans to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide Trail and finally the Mountain to Sea Trail in North Carolina.

He has gained quite a following – so much so, that outfitters are clamoring to sponsor him and businesses from beer halls to sporting goods have jumped on board to actually pay him. He had a job in retail for a couple of years as a manager of an outdoor store. It paid well but he found it sucked the life out of him. So, he lived like a monk and saved the money to foot the bill for this adventure as well as have plenty left over for what might be next afterwards.

But so far, he has such a loyal following of people rooting for him and supporting him, that he has spent very little of what he saved. Turns out, the hiking community, made up of that millennial mindset is one of tightest knit most supportive groups in the world today. In addition, people with distant connections to family and friends have reached out through social media to put him up in a hotel or their home. Carl has thus gained a kind of celebrity hiker status with a fan following. It has been an amazing thing to watch.

Carl is also a good writer and plans on turning this experience into a book. He, perhaps as much anyone, understands the emerging, new, more communal economy among other millennials and like-minded individuals – one that is based on living with joy out of what you love whether you make much at it or not. In other words, buying into experiences that are real and that matter rather than committing to a status quo that looks to be anything but stable.

Large numbers of millennials like Carl are refusing, in mass, to play the game by the old rules. They see it only as enslavement to something that, in the end is less than real and they just want to be free. And who could blame them?

Yet the collective consciousness of our culture has by and large misunderstood these folks and completely dismissed them. Millennials have been and continue to be stereotyped as entitled, sheltered, technology-obsessed, and way too sensitive. It is telling that their way is seen by the current collective consciousness of American culture as nothing more than an irritating disruption.

Consider an ad from a few years back that targeted millennials. It was a State Farm ad called “Never”. State Farm sells risk abatement against an anticipated life trajectory. The “Never” ad assumed that there would be an ongoing generational continuity between millennials and their baby boomer and Generation X parents. It illustrated what was known as the “maturational delay” explanation of millennials preferred by the Pew Research Center. The male character in the ad pronounces, “I am never getting married. I’m never having children. I’m never moving to the suburbs. I’m never going to drive a minivan. I’m never having more children.” But after each pronouncement the character goes on to do those very things.

Well, this ad was built on the dubious assumption that millennials would eventually age in exactly the same way their parents did. The message was clear: their distinctiveness was nothing more than a refusal to grow up. While that may very well be the case with some, Seel says that it is more likely that it represented a faulty analysis that simply favored the status quo. It assumed that millennials were part of the same existing frame of reference for making sense of reality as

their parents. In line with the unfair stereotypes, the ad painted them as being full of themselves and resistant to the culture's old idea of the good life due to laziness and other character flaws. It avoided another possibility: That many Millennials represent what Seel describes at length as a fundamental frame shift. (pp 11-12)

Quoting linguist George Lakoff, Seel writes, "People think in frames... To be accepted, the truth must fit people's frame. If facts do not fit the frame, the frame stays and the facts just bounce off."

So, what if there is an old frame that has its idea of the good life, but it is passing away. And what if many Millennials and others like them intuit this more than recognize it directly? And what if they have eschewed working by the rules of the status quo as either enslavement or as being outright untenable and unsustainable? Indeed, what if they are working out of a newly emerging, entirely different frame?

Seel makes a compelling argument in this direction – that this cultural frame shift just may be unlike anything since Copernicus discovered that the earth was not the center of the universe – that in fact, the earth revolves around a star that is only one of many stars and itself is probably not even the center of the universe.

When such frame shifts happen, they totally disrupt the world as we know it. For instance:

- The writings of Luther and Calvin disrupted Catholic hegemony
- Democracy disrupted monarchy.
- The automobile disrupted horse breeders.
- Email disrupted the postal service and envelope manufacturers.
- Personal computers put typewriter companies out of business.

Of course, the most seismic frame shift occurred with the coming of Jesus. I mean we, in the West, mark time itself forward and backward from his birth. And it is important to note that the carriers of the shift forward, by and large, were not those who benefitted from the status quo, that is the Roman elite and the Jewish leaders, but a bunch of fishermen and day-laborers, a former Pharisee named Paul who claimed to have had some kind of crazy vision, along with plebes, slaves, and pagan non-believers – like the psychic slave girl and the Roman prison guard of today's text.

And how were these Christians first viewed? Paul, Silas, and the other Christian leaders were seen as nothing more than irritating disturber's of the peace. In fact, that is the provocation for their arrest. According to the old frame, they interfered in a big way with local commerce such that it almost resulted in a riot.

But not according to the new frame – the gospel frame. According to that frame, it was the soothsaying woman and the greedy who used her that was the real disturbance. It was she, so say the witness of scriptures, who was the disturber, in fact disturbing God's man, Paul, his work as an apostle and the renewal of all things by way of the gospel. According to this new gospel

frame, she was not *hurt* by Paul when he exorcised that strange psychic spirit. She was set free from the greed of her owners.

Likewise, according to the old frame, when the earthquake freed Paul, Silas and the other prisoners in the jailer's charge, *his* life was over. But according to the new frame, represented by the good news of the resurrected Jesus, his life and the life of his family had just begun.

God is and always has been a frame shifter. Could it be that at least part of the millennial approach to living might represent that? If so, it would behoove us to be mindful of what might be shaping the new frame. And Seel suggests several two of which are foundational to the shift.

The first is hyper-saturation with hyper-pluralism. We have all been affected by it but again, the younger generations most profoundly. The religious world in which I grew up was almost exclusively limited to knowledge of Christianity – both practical and academic. Compare that to my children who have been directly exposed to a multitude of spiritual options. I had never even heard of Yoga or meditation until I got to college and took a course in comparative religion. Today, there are yoga studios even here in the Midwest on practically every corner and my kids discovered through the internet that meditation represents good spiritual hygiene and so are practitioners. And with world knowledge at their fingertips, they can receive teachings from the leading icons of any religion in the world – not just their old man!

A second foundation is authenticity. When it comes to spirituality and religion, those in the emerging new frame, are like blood hounds sniffing out both those who lack real life authentic lived experience to back up their convictions, as well as those who come across as having all the answers; and they want nothing to do with either group.

What they do want is a combination of authenticity and humility based on real life experience and a religious practice that somehow makes the world a better place for everyone – not just so-called Christians.

Perhaps the best metaphor for understanding those who perceive and live out of the new frame is that, kind of like Carl, they are hikers in a world made up of car owners. The *journey* is more important than the *destination*. They are perfectly willing to walk for days on end with the walk punctuated by exciting new encounters here and there with other generous travelers than try to find the fastest, most efficient route.

This is not entitlement or lazy mooching since there are no hard feelings if they end up walking – only excitement, when and if, they get a ride into town for food and a place to stay. And what was it that Jesus said? “Foxes have holes, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Figuring out the place of the church in all this is anything but easy? But it seems to me that the outlook of those who make up the new frame, in many ways, fits much better than the old frame with what it really means to be more like Jesus.

Like it or not, change is afoot and we can either hunker down and let the facts bounce off our old frame or have faith that the earthquake that is surely coming has the ability to change our old frame to the new and set us free.

I hope that you will use the upcoming time of renewal, retracing the threads of grace in your life, to contemplate how those threads might be rewoven into a faithful future that includes integration of the new frame.

Let us pray. Lord God, continue to give us deep appreciation for the gifts of the older frame even as we attempt faithfully to grapple with the new.

You are invited now to contemplate your recommitment to God by considering the dedication of your tithes and gifts and abilities. Your tithes and gifts may be given by leaving an offering in the plate on the table just outside the back of the sanctuary or by mailing a check to the office made out to the church or by going to our church's web site finding the Give button and following the prompts. As you contemplate these things, let us pray:

And bless us and the gifts we bring that no matter what someone's frame they might experience the gospel as good news. In Christ's name we pray, amen.