

Do You Know Why You're Here? (*Acts 19:23-20:1*)

There's an interesting story in the 19th chapter of Acts: Paul and the missionaries were successful at Ephesus, and many Ephesians believed and followed Christ. As a result, the economy took a dip.

The economy centered on the Temple of Diana, goddess of the hunt, goddess of the moon, goddess of childbirth. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; 340 feet long, 160 feet wide; 127 pillars, 60 feet tall. It was the largest stone building in the world at that time.

Surrounding the temple were businesses—booths and kiosks where you could buy the T-Shirts, and the postcards. The "cash cow" was the sale of silver trinkets: phallic symbols and fertility charms. Couples who had rocked an empty cradle for years came to pray to Diana, and to buy the amulets to hang on the bedpost.

Paul said gods made with hands were false gods. He was so convincing that Ephesians turned from idolatry by the droves—and the silversmith trade crashed.

Their "Shop Steward", a man named Demetrius, called a meeting. When you want to stir people up and get them on your side—two strategies rarely fail: wave the flag, or beat the religious drum. You'll almost always get a following.

So, Demetrius said, "These people are undermining our religious foundations. People from all over the world come to worship at this great Temple! It's being reduced to insignificance!" Soon he had a crowd chanting, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" They got all worked up and stormed the courthouse, where they caught the city council totally by surprise. Luke 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.*"

The Jewish community was concerned. They openly opposed idolatry. What if the Ephesians blamed them for their economic problems? It had happened before.

So, they chose Alexander, and coached him to say, "It's Paul's fault; we didn't do anything. It's the Christians!" But when the mob saw he was a Jew, they started chanting again: "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"

This went on for a couple of hours, until the city clerk finally quieted the crowd. He said, "These men are no threat to us. The entire world knows the greatness of Diana and this Temple. If we keep this up we're going to have Roman soldiers all over the place. Go home!"

And the crowd broke up. That's it. Why does Luke include this story in Acts? What value is it for us? There's no clear message or moral; no bad guys. Demetrius and the silversmiths are simply businessmen. Their methods leave something to be desired; but they're not bad guys. They've worked hard for what they have.

The Jews aren't bad guys, either. They're scared for their children. They're an occupied people; they have to "get along."

In the story immediately previous, there were bad guys: evil spirits, books of magic, practitioners of magic, false exorcists, demons... There are no bad guys in this story. They're businessmen; family people—like you and me. So, this story is not easy.

Maybe we could focus on the danger of mixing religion and patriotism. We could talk about that. We could tell stories about Hitler, and how he selectively twisted elements of Christianity to support his crusade for a pure, Aryan race; and to justify the systematic slaughter of 6,000,000 Jews.

Or, we could talk about the McCarthy era of American history—the 1950's, when certain elements of our government dressed Jesus up in red, white and blue and staged a witch hunt—"looking for a communist under every bed", as the press described it. A lot of good people were ruined financially—their reputations damaged beyond repair, because religion and patriotism were inappropriately mixed.

We could get that out of this story; but we'd have to stretch a point. That's not what the story's about.

Still, damage was done. Paul's ministry in Ephesus was ended. He had to leave town, and was never able to go back. Later, when he wanted to visit with the elders of the church at Ephesus, he had to meet them out of town—a place called Miletus.

Maybe—MAYBE—the key is in vs 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."*

"Some were shouting one thing, some another." Each had his own agenda; nobody was listening to anyone. *[Have you ever been to a small-town City Council meeting? I won't go there.]*

I have personal convictions regarding abortion and women's right to make their own health care decisions. which I am willing to share in private, if you wish. There are questions for which there's no consensus in the medical community, or in any of the sciences; or in the legal community, or faith community; nor do I find direct help in Scripture ("Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent we are silent.") So, I will not use the authority of the pulpit to advance a position for which I find no biblical support.

But, even with that faith stance, I don't know a single "pro-life" group, or pro-choice group, with which I would allow my name to be associated. I've not participated in an organized expression on the issue for some years now, because, in my observation, each side has lost its focus. Both sides focus, not on the issue, but on each other, and, as a result, neither side presents a coherent argument. *"Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people didn't even know why they were*

there.” The cause gets lost in the shouting, and the gospel is forced out of town.

You see the same thing in the General Assembly of the Christian Church, or the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, or the Southern Baptist Convention. You see it in virtually every assembly of government, from the Possum Trot City Council to the “State of the Union.”

It is a demon that has many names: partisanism, factionalism, Machiavellianism, “My way or the highway.” Wherever it rears its ugly head and casts its evil spell, the results are always the same: divisiveness, power struggles, ends-justifies-the-means ethics and the castigation and censure of any who disagree with whichever party is in power this week. It is the direct opposite of peace and love and unity, and therefore, wherever it prevails as the dominant way of getting things done, the gospel of Christ is rendered impotent, and might as well move on to more fertile fields.

And so, Paul moved on to Macedonia. But he left behind a little group of people who held to a different standard when they came together. When everybody around them continued to promote his/her own agenda (“*Some were shouting one thing, some another*”) the little church at Ephesus listened for the voice of the Lord, and worked to discern where the Spirit was leading them.

While partisanism and divisiveness raged until “*Most of the people didn’t even know why they were there,*” the church at Ephesus remained faithful to their calling to follow Jesus and become more and more like him. And years later, a man named John received a vision from the Lord concerning end times. He wrote it down, and it became a part of Holy Scripture. In that writing, are these words:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lamp stands: ²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.... (REVELATION 2:1-3 NIV)

In a world gone crazy, when “*Some are shouting one thing, some another,*” it is possible to live as Christians. Many people, even in the church, see a life of competing and achieving and accumulating as the “real world”, and a life of following Jesus—dedicated to peace and justice and unity—as an idealistic, unrealistic fantasy. That perception may be the greatest obstacle to the witness of the church.

The church at Ephesus overcame it—amid circumstances much harsher than ours. And the Lord of heaven responded like this: “*To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life... (REVELATION 2:7 NIV)* There is no greater promise, in this world or the next, than that.