

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

Paul: On the Road Again and Again

Acts 26:1-23

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After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and before Pentecost, the followers of Jesus prayed and selected a replacement for Judas. Jesus had chosen twelve apostles, referring to the twelve tribes of Israel and indicating that he was creating the people of God anew. The other apostles wanted someone who had been with them the whole time the Lord Jesus lived among them from the time of John the Baptist until Jesus was taken into heaven. They wanted another to become a witness with them of Jesus' resurrection. Guided by God, they chose a man named Matthias (Acts 1:15-26). He's never mentioned again and we know nothing else about him.

Besides the original twelve, and Matthias, there were others in the New Testament who were called apostles. Paul of Tarsus is the most prominent of those other apostles. That's why we have a painting of him and we're doing a sermon about him. Kenneth Wyatt says that as he considered all that Paul did for the church, he felt he had to include him in the paintings of the apostles. We'll survey Paul's life and sample his writings. Wyatt says he wanted to portray Paul's letter writing. He had in mind what Paul had to look like. Then one day he was at a laymen's retreat. He sat down to eat, turned to his left and discovered that he had sat down next to Paul! By the time the meal was over, they had arranged a sitting and Wyatt had discovered a few facts about this man. His name was Bob Barnett, he was a retired radio technician, had four children, had been a Methodist for forty-four years, and said that he had always known Christ (*The Apostles* 50).

In the passage we've read (Acts 26:1-23), Paul has been in prison in Caesarea for over two years. The Roman governor who first heard his case, left him in prison when he left office. Now Festus is the Roman governor who is trying to understand what Paul has done and why the Jewish leaders are angry at him. In his last court appearance, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to the Emperor. Festus doesn't know what to

say when he sends Paul to Rome. But King Herod Agrippa, ruler of this part of Palestine, is visiting. So Festus asks him to hear Paul and help determine how to recommend him to the emperor's court.

Now Paul has been called in to give testimony before the king and his associates. Paul speaks respectfully and acknowledges Agrippa's acquaintance with Jewish customs and disputes. He starts by recounting a bit of his early life. The people who brought Paul up on charges know him and how he lived since childhood. Paul grew up in Tarsus, in the Roman province of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). He was from a faithful Jewish family, but was also born a Roman citizen. His Hebrew name, Saul, reflects his Jewish background. His Greek name, Paul, reflects his Roman citizenship—and this is the name he used in his travels around the empire. He was trained in Jerusalem under a rabbi named Gamaliel, who is mentioned in Acts 5:34.

Paul was a Pharisee. He calls this group "the strictest sect of our religion." He was devoted to God and to purity of life according to God's Law. The Pharisees believed that God would some day raise the dead. Now Paul digresses a bit to share some of his message. He says he has been imprisoned and on trial because he shares the hope of his people for resurrection. There was another leading group in Judaism called the Sadducees, who didn't believe in resurrection. The priests and many elders came from this group and they seem to be the ones who had the most trouble with Paul. He asks, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" Of course, he believes that God has already raised someone from the dead—Jesus, the Messiah. Other Pharisees would still be looking for a future resurrection and many did not believe that God raised Jesus.

Really, Paul is establishing his Jewish credentials as he recounts his upbringing and his early faith. In his letter to the church at Philippi, he says this:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the

law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. (3:4-7)

Now Paul recounts another phase of his life, a time when he shared the view that Jesus was not the Messiah, he believed God did not raise him from the dead and that the followers of Jesus were deluded and possibly dangerous. He set out to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He put many of “the Lord’s people” in prison and approved their death sentences. He went to synagogues and rounded up Jesus’ followers so they would be punished. He tried to make them blaspheme, that is, renounce Jesus. His obsession with persecuting Jesus’ followers led him to go after them in foreign cities. He was on the road as a persecutor.

We first meet Paul earlier in Acts when Stephen, a deacon and powerful preacher, is on trial. The Council drags Stephen out and stones him to death. Paul, who’s called Saul at this point, approves their killing Stephen (7:54-8:1). But something about Stephen’s life and witness and his graciousness in facing death stayed with Paul. He never forgot that he had persecuted the followers of Jesus. And I don’t think he ever got over God’s grace that called him from that life, forgave him, and gave him new life. Here’s how he writes about that to his associate Timothy:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. (1 Tim 1:12-15; cf. Galatians 1:13-16)

In Paul's testimony before Agrippa, he now tells how God got his attention and brought him into new life. Paul was on the road to Damascus, Syria. It's interesting that Damascus is in the news in our time. That same city, that same region, was the site of significant events in the Bible.

Paul was on the road about noon when he saw a light from heaven. This light was brighter than the noonday sun. It blazed all around Paul and those with him. Heaven opened. Paul got a glimpse of the heavenly dimension. Falling to the ground, he heard a voice speaking in Aramaic (similar to Hebrew, the language of the Jews at that time). The voice said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It's hard for you to kick against the goads." That's an ancient proverb. It refers to an animal that's harnessed or yoked for work. Kicking the goad or prod attached to the harness could be painful. God was closing in on Saul, convicting him of sin, showing him that how he was going about serving God was all wrong. Paul had been resisting those prods to his conscience, but they were becoming harder to resist.

Paul responded to the voice, "Who are you, Lord?" And the answer came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." It's interesting how closely Jesus identifies with his people, his followers. Paul was persecuting them, but the risen and exalted Lord says, "You're persecuting *me*."

In earlier tellings of this testimony, Paul is blinded and has to be led into Damascus, where a disciple named Ananias is sent by the Lord to pray for him and baptize him. Paul's blindness is healed—physically and spiritually (Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-21). In this telling, Paul condenses things a bit and moves right into the commission the Lord gave him. The Lord Jesus appointed Paul to be a servant and a witness of what he would see of Jesus. He would need to be rescued from Jews and Gentiles. But the Lord was sending him to them to open their eyes and lead them to conversion, to turn them from darkness to light, and from Satan's power to God's. Responding to this witness they would receive forgiveness of sins and a place among God's holy people. That's a great summary of gospel ministry. Writing to a church he had not personally visited, Paul says something similar:

... and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:12-14)

Recalling how Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, and what followed that appearance, Paul says, "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven." Seeing Jesus for himself convinced Paul that he really is alive and what his followers were saying about him is true. Jesus is the Messiah and Savior, Son of God and Lord. Immediately, Paul started proclaiming Jesus in Damascus, then he was on the road to other cities.

It's hard to put together an exact timeline of Paul's life. But drawing from his writings and Acts, it seems he visited Jerusalem after his conversion. Then he spent some time in Arabia. He returned to his hometown of Tarsus for several years. That's where he was when a disciple named Barnabas came and got him and brought him to Antioch. They ministered there for a time, then the church sent them out as missionaries. Paul went on three major mission journeys around the Mediterranean Sea. He sums up his message here, "I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds."

Part of his ministry involved collecting an offering for the poor Christians who suffered from a famine in Judea. He brought that offering to Jerusalem, along with some representatives from some of the Gentile churches. But some hotheads in Jerusalem thought Paul had brought Gentiles into the Temple and desecrated it. A riot broke out. Paul was arrested and held in Jerusalem for a time, until a plot to kill him was discovered. Then the Romans took him to Caesarea by the Sea where he is at this point in Acts.

He claims he is teaching what the Hebrew Scriptures said would happen. He says that Israel's hopes are fulfilled in Jesus. "The Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

At this point, Festus starts shouting at Paul, telling him he's crazy. But Paul says he's not insane and appeals to King Agrippa to verify what he's talking about. Agrippa asks, "Do you think you can persuade me to be a Christian in such a short time?" Paul replies, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today might become what I am, except for these chains" (28-29). Paul wants them all to become followers of Jesus, forgiven and living new life in Christ.

The rest of Acts tells about Paul's journey to Rome and how he remained under house arrest there for two years. All along, he kept preaching and teaching and writing.

Paul is a stirring example of an apostle. He saw the risen Lord. He was called and commissioned and told to go share the message. And he did go. He planted new churches everywhere he went. He faced opposition in many places. One English preacher said, "Everywhere Paul went, there was a riot. Everywhere I go, they serve me tea."

Though he was almost always on the move and starting new work in new places, he remained concerned for the people he had introduced to Christ. Nearly half of the books in the New Testament are letters that Paul wrote. Most of them are to churches, communities of faith. A few were written to individuals. These letters remind churches of the gospel, the good news of what God has done in Jesus. They try to clear up misunderstandings. They answer questions. They include teaching about life in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul applied the good news of Jesus to life in Christian community. We still draw on his letters to help us live as followers of Jesus.

We don't know for sure what happened to Paul after the close of the book of Acts. Tradition says that he was released from that imprisonment and traveled some more—possibly going to Spain. He was arrested again in Rome, during the Emperor Nero's persecution. And he was executed by beheading around A. D. 64 or 65.

Paul's legacy lives on in his writings and in all those through the ages who have been led to Christ through his works. People like St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Wesley, as well as countless unnamed saints have

discovered new life through God's word that came in the words of the apostle Paul.

If Paul were writing to First United Methodist Church, what do you think he would say? After reminding us that we are the people of God because of God's grace given in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and that God's personal presence and power live in us in the Holy Spirit, do you think he might say something like, "Join me in mission. Join me in finding ways to tell the old story to all kinds of new people. Don't let anything get in the way of being the people of God in mission. There are people all around you who need what God offers in the gospel. Some of them are waiting to see it in you and hear it from you. Trust the God of grace to work through you by his Spirit."