

May 12, 2019
Welcome to Paul
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Acts 13:1-3, 14:8-18

13 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

14 ⁸ In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And the man sprang up and began to walk. ¹¹ When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. ¹⁴ When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, ¹⁵ “Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; ¹⁷ yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” ¹⁸ Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

A couple of weeks ago, Rob made a comment about me not liking Paul, and I protested and Rob kind of rolled his eyes. It's one of those things I don't want to be true, so I don't like it being pointed out by others.

I want to like Paul, because I fundamentally agree with him. I agree with him about the urgency of the Christian gospel for the salvation of humankind. Not in some theoretical, theological explanation of God, but in the universe-bending reality of Jesus' resurrection: the annihilation of death's power over life and the subsequent loss of power we have over one another.

We may take each other's breath, but no one and nothing may separate us from God. *A world full of people who know that, Paul said, will be a new creation.* It's Paul's ways and

means that give me so much trouble – and the way so much of the really mean-spirited, localized things he said got printed in the same size font as his fundamental explanation of the gospel. That’s what makes him so difficult to like. His bedside manner, we’d say if he were a surgeon.

Along with all my own issues with ministers, he drives me nuts for the same reason so many do – how he takes himself so seriously, for one. A few years ago a new minister arrived here on the east side of town. The day he moved into his office his church had a roof leak, and rain water poured through his office ceiling, all over the boxes that had been delivered. I thought it would be hilarious to take him over an IU golf umbrella as a welcome-to-the-neighborhood gift, you know, the very first time I met him. He did not find it hilarious at all. He only stayed a few years. We never really connected. Tom just didn't get me.

Paul wouldn't have gotten me either. He'd have had no interest in *getting me*. Paul had no interests apart from preaching the gospel. He had no family, no hobbies, no particular place that he called home. (He does – weirdly – have a Facebook page, maintained by a guy named Seth, no doubt a seminary student who takes himself very seriously.)

Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the peacemakers. Not Paul. Paul was loud, overbearing, and argumentative. He was prone to violence before his conversion and not averse to it after. Dialogue and compromise were not his go-to solutions. He was way more likely to ask forgiveness than permission. He was not big on second chances for people who screwed up. He had *nothing to lose and heaven to gain*, as he said more than once, which made him either crazy brave or stupidly reckless. Or both.

His authoritarian personality was aimed at a single target: the total reconciliation of humanity with God, achieved in the event of Jesus Christ. Which left him no time or patience for anyone who imagined the gospel had to do with less, be they his enemies or his beloved churches.

Let's pray: *Help us be like Paul where and when being like him furthers your purposes, O God. May the urgency with which he shared the gospel infect your church today. Amen.*

Do keep in mind that Paul is the same person after his conversion that he was before. A high-born, well-educated Jew, a religious leader with power in the Temple system. Before the Risen Christ got hold of him (Acts 9), Paul was profoundly sure that the Christ-followers within Judaism were a threat so urgent and insidious to the faith, he personally sought and delivered their death warrants. Jesus decided, “*Hey, I want that guy on my side.*” So he struck him blind and terrified and sent him to stay with some Christ-followers until he decided what to do with him.

Significant time passes between chapters 9 and 13. Paul goes to Jerusalem to join up with the original disciples – Peter and his bunch. He's genuinely surprised they aren't excited to include him. If there is one distraction to Paul's ministry, it's this – his relationships with the other apostles.

Eventually they do work together, but the originals never truly accept him as a brother. There's always this tension. Grudges, miscommunications. He brags in a way that is so annoying – and yet sort of sad, embarrassing almost: Paul making his own case for how he's as good as them.

He reminds me of a high school kid we knew when our kids were young. Carl and I worked the band booster tent at high school football games years ago. One night, right by our tent a boy picked a fight with a smaller boy – and lost. Carl broke them up, but the bigger kid's nose was already smashed in, blood everywhere. I took him by the arm and brought him to the tent. He was angry, crying (like high school boys do, you know – angry that they are crying), and yelling at me, *“I'm fine. It doesn't even hurt!”* Just spitting blood with every word. *I know it*, I told him, *just let me see if your teeth are okay.* I cleaned him up a little so he could go to the parking lot and finish the fight.

Paul doesn't annoy me nearly as much as he did when I was a baby minister, before I saw enough of how the world is – how hurting people imagine no one will notice how much they're hurting if they sound loud or tough or smart enough. I think a good therapist could have really helped Paul find some peace and stability, maybe even some real friendships.

The book of Romans is dense writing from near the end of Paul's ministry, as close as anything the Bible has to Christian theology. The seeds of that theology are right here – decades earlier – in the 14th chapter of Acts. Mimicking Jesus' marching orders in Matthew 10, church leaders send disciples out in pairs to various regions to preach, teach, and heal. Barnabas gets paired with Paul. (I'd love to know how that happened.)

Nevertheless, they go, using the same general plan Paul will follow for the rest of his career. Arrive in a city and locate the gathering place where people worship: synagogues in Jewish towns; temples or academies in Greek places. I tried to imagine where Paul would go now, in Western societies. Where do thinking, worshipping, unchurched people gather? Cyberspace, eh? Maybe Paul would be in his room in front of his laptop camera. His own YouTube channel? Paul and Barnabas arrive in Lystra, having just been chased out of Iconium by some offended Jews.

Two details matter here. The huge one to be addressed as we move through Romans – for lack of a better title: Anti-Semitism, the New Testament church history. Second: what happened in Iconium. They had preached in a synagogue there, and a bunch of people believed their message about Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles. But some of the Jews

who did not were offended. Offended the message was offered to Gentiles too, as if they were equally entitled to it. A message they themselves did not want, yet were convinced that it ought not be available to their Gentile neighbor. So convinced, they are willing to commit violence to block their neighbor's access to it.

Paul and Barnabas make a run for it to this town Lystra, where they plan to do the same thing again. It's not clear if they are in a synagogue or not, but among the listeners are followers of the Greek gods. Paul is preaching along when he notices a man who, he can tell, has the faith to be healed. *I've no idea what that means but I think it's amazing.*

The guy is triple crippled, Luke says: *lame, born that way, had never walked.* Luke wants us to really believe this is a miracle. Paul tells him to stand. He stands. He jumps. He walks. Triple healed. And the crowd goes wild! Hermes and Zeus have come down in human form to their very own village. They rush to pay proper homage. A priest is fetched. And bulls, for the sacrifice that must be made – right now. Can you imagine the party they are about to throw?

The text goes by fast, so it's easy to miss what doesn't happen, what would so easily happen had any other preachers been there. Remember the sons of Zebedee? (Mark 10) They asked to sit at Jesus' right and left when he came into their kingdom. They'd have probably bickered about who got to be Zeus. Think if Paul and Barnabas had said Yes. Think of the leverage such a position would have allowed, the platform and protection for their preaching and their ministry. I can imagine lots of ministers seeing that offer differently than Paul and Barnabas did.

Paul protests immediately, "*We are mortals just like you.*" And he circles back, preaching his way to the one story he came to tell. He might have made some headway even. It's easy to think so, if we stop reading here. But the text has no break. Those same Jews from Iconium who were chasing them catch up. And they get their say with the crowd. And because folks are fickle, then and now, they win them over.

This time we don't get details, only that the crowd picked up rocks and stoned Paul and Barnabas until they believed they'd killed them. Because they could, same as folks still do everywhere, every day – kill the folks who suggest that everyone deserves to have what by all rights only belongs to some. Maybe not with literal stones.

There are folks in supposedly free countries right now casting votes to take away people's rights. Because they wear suits and speak English and don't throw actual rocks doesn't make it different. Folks are just as dead because of an embedded kind of prejudice that exists at so deep a level within our hearts and our human culture that we have no words nor name for it. So deep and urgent is our need to keep that injustice dormant within and among us, there is little we won't do to drown the mention of it out loud.

You know why Paul was so irritating? Not because he said something so outrageous, so false, so wrong. He said what everyone knew and feared and couldn't bear to face. This world as it is cannot stand in light of the love of God, the love of God for God's creation. The way human beings regard each other is something other than the very fiber of creation. It may be who we are, but not who we were created or are destined to be. We are God's. And God is making all things right, from the greatest to the least.

The living Christ got hold of Paul and he could not go back to not knowing. And nothing anyone said or did bothered him enough to try. That people know, was all that mattered to him. And so he found his place. I look forward to reading him with you.

Let's pray together.