

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Third Sunday of Easter - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Acts 9:1-6[7-20]

Psalm 30

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

05/01/2022

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

1After [he appeared to his followers in Jerusalem,] Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 3Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 6He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. 7That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. 8But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. 9When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10Jesus said to them,

“Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” 11So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. 13Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.15When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” 16A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” 17He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. 18Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” 19(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

St. Paul and St. Paul's

Christ is Risen! Our first reading has always been one of my favorites. So, in 2007 or 2008 when the three pastors teaching confirmation class at Camp Luther in Cowen, WV came to me for help, I was overjoyed. You see, they wanted to illustrate the bright light that blinded Paul... so they came to me. If you go to buy a flashlight, you may be looking at a figure called “lumens” to help you find out which one is the brightest. If you’ve been around a little while, you may know a different measurement called “candlelight power.” It’s not nearly as accurate as lumens, but it’s what we used to use. And on the side of my gigantic spotlight, you saw the measurement “15 million” candle power. From the moment my eyes first set sight upon its beauty in Cablea’s I knew I had to have it. And so I spent too much of my graduation money on a spotlight that was so big it came with a strap that you needed if you wanted to lug the thing around. Two hands were required if you wanted to operate it. The first time I charged the thing it took almost 24 hours. I think it had a battery similar in size to what you would find in a medium sized sedan. But boy was it bright! From my house in Ohio you could EASILY light up the hills on the West Virginia side of the Ohio River. It was a fitting light source for illustrating Paul’s blindness in our story from Acts.

As I was reminiscing on that story, I realized that I have never done a sermon on St. Paul or his “conversion” experience. Well, today we fix that. I figure that it’s probably important for the congregation to know a little bit about the man whose name graces the sign outside. Wouldn’t that be ironic, a St. Paul’s congregation that knows nothing about St. Paul?! Sadly, the reasons this congregation picked the name St. Paul’s have been lost to annals of history. Jackie Miller, our last living charter member, was there all those years ago, but can’t seem to recall why it was picked. I couldn’t

find statistics for America, but in the Church of England, St. Paul's ranks number 6 in the list of most popular names.¹ And just to put one little argument to rest, our name really is St. Paul's, not St. Paul. If you look at our original hand written constitution in our rolls it says St. Paul's. (Actually, our full name is St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church.)

Mark Allan Powell begins his chapter on Paul in *Introducing the New Testament* with the following illustration: "*Religion professors sometimes like to stump their students with a trick question: Who was the founder of Christianity? The students, of course, say, 'Jesus,' and the professor responds, 'No. It was Paul.'*"² The point is that while Jesus is at the core of our message, it was Paul who made sure that message was spread to the four corners of the world. He truly is a remarkable man. Just looking at the New Testament we can see that over half of the books are either written by him or written in his honor. Powell points out that we have four different sources for the life of Paul.³ The primary and most important sources are his own letters. We have seven undisputed letters that we know are written by him. We also have six disputed letters which he may be the author of but more likely were written by a student of Paul's in his name. The next source is where our first reading came from, the Acts of the Apostles. It was written 20-30 years after Paul's death. Finally, we have church tradition, which is the least reliable.

The first thing to realize is that Paul was born, raised, and died a Jew. Just as Jesus was not trying to create a different religion, neither was Paul. All the followers of Jesus believed that they were still living out their Jewish

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dedications_in_the_Church_of_England

² Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. p. 231.

³ Ibid. p. 234.

faith. Because of this, it's inaccurate to call our story from Acts a "conversion." Because for Paul, it would never have been seen in such a way. Paul realigned his Jewish faith, he did not convert. But, because language is hard, I understand why we still say "conversion."

Another detail we often get wrong is that Paul essentially changes his name from Saul to Paul after the events of Acts 9. Paul didn't change his name. While Paul was a Jew, he was also a Roman citizen. It was common for Jewish Roman citizens to essentially go by two different names. One would be the Hellenized version of his name that he would go by in gentile circles, Paul. Gentiles were any group of people that were not Jewish. But when Paul was with his Jewish siblings, he would go by the more accurate Hebrew name, Saul. He was named after the first king of Israel. What happens is that Paul begins to go by the Hellenized version because it fits more accurately with his understanding of God's call. Paul was to be a disciple for the Gentiles, to share the Good News with those not of Jewish faith.

Paul was uniquely suited for this task. He was born and grew up in a city called Tarsus, which is in modern day Turkey. It can be found near the southern part of the country, not far from the Mediterranean Sea. One scholar writes that Tarsus was *"a thriving cosmopolitan road between the East and the West and a vibrant intellectual center of Stoic and Cynic philosophy... a young Jew growing up in Tarsus would have been the beneficiary of this cosmopolitan Hellenistic environment. His first language would have been Greek; the Scriptures he read would have been in Greek translation; the literary models for his letters would have been Hellenistic; and all of these would have colored his thinking, identity, and*

self-understanding."⁴ Remember that detail, because it will become an important detail later.

But, as I said, Paul was a Jew. At a young age he traveled to Jerusalem to study under the famous Jewish Rabbi Gamaliel. It was here where Paul's Jewish faith would have been strengthened. He would have learned Hebrew, both written and spoken. We know little else of Paul's schooling and early days. But what we DO know is that he was passionate. This was a man who gave his faith everything he had. And so as he grew older and saw the split growing in the Jewish church because of the followers of the Way, the first name for Christians, he would have done everything he could to stop it. This is why we are first introduced to Paul in Acts as someone who persecuted the faith. It's unclear if he participated in the murder of any Christians, but we do know he hunted them for arrest.

But Paul changes everything after Jesus Christ speaks to him. He then does a full 180, learning from the Apostles before he too sets off to share the Gospel. Because Paul was called to those who were not of Jewish faith. Paul would be the one who spread the story across the world to those who were Gentile. While the disciple and Apostle Peter would be the leader of the movement among the Jews, Paul would lead the push to the many non-Jewish people of the world.

His ministry followed a common pattern. He would move into a new town where he would touch base with the local Jewish community to discern if any were believers. This would give him some connections in the town. But most of the work happened on the streets where he preached and shared his message. He did all this while holding down a full-time job. It is

⁴ Roetzel, Calvin J. "Paul, the Apostle." pp. 404-421 of *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. IV. Edited by Katharine Door Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009.

often said that he was a tent-maker. But the Greek could also be translated as “worker of canvas.” Dr. Brian Peterson from Southern Seminary pointed out that it was likely that Paul worked by painting, repairing, and handling the canvas backdrops with traveling players. And because Paul grew up in a Hellenized world, he was perfectly suited to become a disciple to the Gentiles. He knew how they thought, he could speak fluently, and as his letters illustrate, he was a master of the pen.

Paul is a titan in Christianity. What I find amazing is how he was able to shift his focus so quickly and passionately after encountering Jesus Christ on that road to Damascus. How many of us would have been defeated, beaten down by our previous mistakes? And yet Paul kept going, working just as hard as before. And that passion didn't stop. You know what happened to my bright spotlight? Little by little the battery got weaker and weaker. Eventually barely holding a charge, and certainly not as bright as it was when new. Paul on the other hand never gave up. It's alluded to in Acts and II Timothy that Paul was martyred in Rome. We aren't completely sure, some traditions hold that Paul left Rome and traveled to Spain where he died, a journey he did intend to take. But the bulk of scholarship leans towards a death around the year 64 in Rome under persecution from Emperor Nero. One thing remains true regardless... While God can work through anyone and anything, we see in St. Paul what's possible when God chooses someone spectacular. He serves as a witness to us all, that we can always change, and that God will always continue working through those who are willing. Paul... a fitting name for a congregation, wouldn't you say? Amen.