

Sermon: The Call of Paul
Scripture: Acts 9:1-20
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: April 17, 2016

It was wonderful to be installed last Sunday. Thanks to all of you who were a part of that celebration. It is a treat for me to share with the various people of my life, past and present, this lovely church community where I have landed. One of my favorite parts of the service was the reminder of how this church has reached out and opened up your facilities and hearts to a range of people and ministries over the years, including the start of the Jewish temple in Chidley Hall and The Multicultural Network. Rabbi Cari's presence was a particularly powerful one, I thought, with her rooting the moment in the Abrahamic tradition and her chanting of the priestly blessing. She and I sat at Starbucks the week before and she did not shrink from my request that she represent all of Judaism, and the entire Interfaith Community, and she even represented for me a particularly seminal moment in my own spiritual journey that involved another Rabbi and with all of that she stepped right up to it!

To have a Rabbi in here and speaking from our lectern is to remind us that Jesus our Lord was a Jew and that Judaism is our mother faith. It is to remind us that we believe through Jesus Christ we too have become heirs with our Jewish brothers and sisters to the God's blessing of the world through Abraham. In Jesus' parable of the workers who come in at the 11th hour and still get the same pay as those who had worked all day... that's us, that's the non-Jews, the Gentiles, who though we are not flesh and blood part of the people of Israel, we are included in this relationship with God by way of one Jewish man's flesh and blood that we ingest and to become part of the covenant.

The understanding and theology of all of this was worked out painstakingly by another Jewish man who lived at the same time as Jesus. Before his seminal, life-shattering experience of God, he was known mainly by his Jewish name Saul. After the experience, he used the Roman version of his name, Paul. It's worth keeping in mind that Paul wasn't a Jew who had a conversion experience to Christianity, but that Paul was a Jew who had an experience of the risen Christ and so began sharing

how this risen Christ was the fulfillment of Jewish salvation history and how cosmically his death and resurrection was the pivotal moment in human history where everything changed for everyone. He went from a passionate but narrow, constrained, strict understanding of the Jewish tradition to this mind-blowingly broad and universal understanding of the Jewish tradition.

Because, you see, at the time of Jesus there were of course a great variety of understandings of what it meant to be Jewish and how that defined human life and the understandings were often impacted by the context within which the Jews lived. There were, for instance, Greek-speaking Jews who had been scattered around the Roman Empire and were living their lives in the Greco-Roman context of the diaspora and there were the Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking Jews who lived in and around the promised land of Judea proper, the hometown folk. Within these different groups of Jews there were various world-views and theological perspectives. So for instance there were some Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora who were more militant about maintaining their Jewish identity because they tried to remain distinctly themselves in the face of being minorities in a majority foreign culture. So they tended to be very strict about their Jewish practices and would insist on others doing the same. Still, there were other diaspora Jews who had allowed themselves to be more fully assimilated into wider cultures which led them to a more universal understanding of their tradition, emphasizing how God was the Father of all people and all people would be drawn into God's salvation. The more liberal Jews, were drawn to emphasize the prophets and their call to justice rather than the laws of Moses and its call to ritual purity which more conservative Jewish emphasis. Sound familiar? All religions have such groups and often those inner-religious lines of liberal and conservative are harder to deal with than the interfaith lines of separation.

Of these two strains of Jewish perspectives, you could say Jesus had a more prophetic, innovative, approach to Judaism, very willing to place compassion and justice before ritual practice and purity. And Paul, on the other hand, coming as he did from Tarsus in modern day Turkey, would have been of the more conservative, ritualistic, tradition-bearing, perspective. He was deeply concerned about maintain

Jewish purity and distinction and saw the followers of this crucified rabbi named Jesus as doing damage to the already tenuous situation of the Jews in the Roman Empire. Some of the Jewish followers of “The Way”, which is what the Jesus movement was first called, still maintained Jewish practices of kosher, circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and the like, and so Paul had no problem with them. But there were those other Jewish followers of this man who were disregarding Jewish law as irrelevant! It was these Jews that Paul saw as the enemies of God and he was convinced that they would be the ruin of his ancient and adored Jewish tradition and the Jewish people themselves.

That’s why he took it upon himself to stamp them out. So Paul hears that a particularly vital group of followers of the Way were active in the synagogues of Damascus in Syria. He gets permission from the High Priest in Jerusalem to arrest these people and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment. This was critical for Paul and other Jewish authorities because the Jewish community in Damascus was already in a precarious situation struggling for survival in that part of the Roman Empire. In Fact 30 years from the time of Paul’s trip there, at the beginning of the Jewish Roman war in the 70’s, all the Jews of Damascus, followers of Jesus or not, were rounded up, herded into a Greek gymnasium and slaughtered in about an hours’ time.

So Paul was on a serious mission to save his people from the weakening of Judaism that he believed the Jesus movement represented. He left Jerusalem and traveled on foot for 135 miles, like walking from here to Albany, New York. And towards the end of his journey, he came up over Mt. Hermon where the cold of the mountain air often mingled with the heat of the desert plains and created fantastical electrical storms and sure enough there came this massive flash of light and Paul is knocked to the ground and hears the voice of Jesus himself ask him “why are you persecuting me?” He’s blinded by the light and told to go on into Damascus and find a man named Ananias. So Paul goes exactly to where he was planning to go all along to do violence to these followers of Jesus, but he is forced to go blind, utterly vulnerable and in need of them. When Ananias, a follower of Jesus living in Damascus, gets the same miraculous word, he’s less amazed by the vision and voice

than he is by what Jesus is asking of him...which is to heal the man called Paul who is coming. Ananias knows exactly who Paul is! "You mean, that vile and violent man is coming here and I'm not supposed to hide from him nor fight him but HEAL him?" And God says, to paraphrase, "yep".

And that was the seminal moment for the unfolding of the Christian religion, just behind the resurrection itself, when Paul becomes an Apostle and is called by God to open up God's grace and salvation to the world beyond Israel. He had a hard road of it for sure as there were huge disagreements and tensions within the Jesus movement itself for exactly how God was going to affect salvation through Jesus and who would be included in it, just as there are in Christian circles today; who gets in on this salvation project of God's and who is left behind.

At the time of Jesus and Paul, there were Jews who believed that God's salvation at the end of times would come with a great battle on Mt. Megiddo where Israel would be redeemed and the heathen gentiles would be destroyed, otherwise known as Armageddon. But there were also Jews who believed the end would come as a great and final banquet, not a battle at all, where all nations would stream to God and be welcomed in. Isaiah 25 - "I will destroy the shroud of death that enfolds all people, says the lord, and on this mountain I will make a rich feast for all nations." Through his mystical experience on the mountain, Paul was transformed and went from "it's all going to end in a great battle and the wicked will be destroyed" perspective to "it's all going to end in a great feast." Thanks in large part to Paul's promoting of this perspective, we Christians practice that very feast in the here and now through the the Lord's supper until that final feast is prepared and celebrated. It's a beautiful thing!

Paul's story sits at the very heart of our tradition and at the very crux of the Christian spiritual life. A zealous man full of fury and violence and self-righteousness, looking to be the instrument of God's vengeance, called by the loving heart of God to instead be a conduit of love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace. Paul's call, his story, doubles down on what Jesus taught, that no one can be discarded, no one, written off as evil, dismissed as a lost cause because God is actually the God of the lost causes. The God of Israel, the God of the gentiles, the God of violent Paul and

betraying Peter, is the God who reaches out to save and grace them all with mercy upon mercy. So what does that mean for us as believers in this extravagantly generous God, this redeeming and restoring and recycling God, who wastes no one and nothing, but saves all? It means we ourselves must be in the business of giving second and third chances, forgiving 70 X 7 times. It means we must approach those around us always giving the benefit of the doubt. It means we do no violence nor deal out death no matter how just or deserving or efficacious such a death might seem to us, because those lost cause people are the children of a lost cause God. Think how easily Paul could have been discarded or Peter or, considering Marathon Monday tomorrow, think Dzhokhar Tsarnaev who sits in a prison cell awaiting state execution. We cannot idly accept such a thing when we have the hope and the faith in a God who redeems. We must be careful and vigilant to reserve judgment and violence at all costs to give time and space for the grace of God to enter in and transform his life, our life, in the end everyone's life so that the great banquet can be a welcoming table for all. Amen.