

Sermon, 4/22/18

*The Path*, chapter 22 (Paul)

“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” (2 Corinthians 11:30)

Good morning. Today we return to our focus on readings from *The Path*. We are coming to the end of our journey as we look to read the final three chapters of this work over the next few weeks. Today-- and this past week hopefully—we consider chapter 22, titled “Grace May Abound.” This chapter covers a selection from Acts and the letters of Paul the Apostle.

Paul is an important and influential part of the Christian story. Some modern scholars even go so far as to say Paul is “the founder” of the Christian religion. That is a conversation for another day, but suffice to say I disagree—Paul was a great messenger of the story of our redemption that began with the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus. But without the risen Jesus, Paul would likely have remained stuck in a life of religious rigidity.

A few points for us to remember—Paul wrote a great deal of the New Testament. His letters include the earliest writings about Jesus—some as soon as fifteen or so years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Paul’s letters-- as opposed to the Gospels, which were written as more intentional works of literature—give us an early and less composed sense of the early years of the Christian movement. Paul is writing to address real issues among real people who are seeking to follow Jesus as Lord.

So we need to pay close attention to what Paul wrote. In *The Path*, the editors had a difficult choice of what to include and what to leave out. I probably would have chosen different parts of his letters if it was up to me. Regardless, the editors have chosen parts of what Paul wrote to give us a sense of who he was and what mattered to him in his faith and ministry.

Personally, I have always felt a sense of connection with Paul. I relate to his passion and desire to do the right thing; and how he came to realize that passion sometimes gets in the way of doing the right thing the right way—in other words, with love. Historically, Paul had great influence with well-known leaders and teachers of the Christian faith—St. Augustine and Martin Luther and John Wesley and Karl Barth. Particularly his letter to the Galatians and his letter to the Romans grabbed the attention of these influential people and helped them to see how they were lost personally—and how the church had lost its way regarding the centrality of God’s grace and our need to trust in God alone for our salvation.

Others have felt more ambivalence and even antipathy toward Paul. This is true among many women who have experienced the pain of how some of Paul’s words from two thousand years ago have been used throughout the church’s history to limit the full inclusion of women in the life and ministry of the church. That is a legitimate counter-point when we talk about Paul. I would only add that his words on some subjects reflect the words of a faithful Jewish man in ancient times. I believe if Paul came back today, he would be the first to help us to re-engage and question some of his written comments and other comments attributed to him.

I encourage all of us to read all or at least some of Paul's letters. Later this year, we may read through one or two of his letters, from beginning to end, similarly to how we have used *The Path* this past program year. My purpose will be to go deeper in one or two letters instead of the passing treatment we give them in the lectionary. This will allow us to know Paul and learn his message of grace more fully. It may also cause us to wrestle with those parts that challenge us or cause us to have questions.

For today, I want to focus on one main point about Paul: his personal transformation and what it meant for his ministry and message; and what that means for us today. As we read in the summary of Acts in chapter 21 of *The Path*, Paul—then known as Saul—is first introduced to the reader as a violent opponent of “the Way,” the first followers of the risen Jesus. In the very first scene in which he is introduced, he is supporting the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. That lets us know how Saul was at that point in his life—religiously conservative and conscientious to the extreme so that he could justify the use of violence against people with whom he disagrees.

From being a witness to Stephen's stoning, Saul decided to go further and be directly involved in eradicating what he saw as a threat to his faith. Then something happened. Many of us know, at least by title, of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. The risen Jesus appeared to him and asked a direct question— “Why do you persecute me?” You see, Jesus in heaven fully identifies with all people who are oppressed now, especially those who profess faith in Him.

This encounter stunned Saul. He cannot imagine that the Lord cares about the weak and oppressed and not so much about the religious rules that Saul was fighting violently to defend. This encounter left Saul blind and humbled. He had to be led by hand to a place where he remained blind, not eating or drinking, waiting for what would come next.

The Lord sent a reluctant servant to pray for Saul and we're told that “something like scales fell from his eyes.” Saul—who would soon change his name to Paul, had one of the most dramatic conversion experiences in the Bible and in church history (I think some folks with more boring stories may have conversion envy!). But like most of us, Paul would begin a process of healing from what was broken in him and his view of life before his conversion. His healing process—like ours-- would last the rest of his life.

We get a summary of what that healing meant for him in two of the passages that make up part of chapter 22 of *The Path*. I would call them examples of Paul's resume. One that we did not read in church is from his letter to the Philippians. He reminds his readers of his *bona fides* as a man of faith and a religious leader— his heritage as a Hebrew, his conscientiousness as a follower of the Law, and even his zeal leading to his persecution of the church. Yet Paul writes that he came to consider all these things as nothing but human waste (Philippians 3:8; Paul is nothing if not vivid in his writing). Paul came to understand that what really matters is full trust in Christ that enabled him to share in Christ's suffering and hope in Christ's resurrection.

The other summary of his accomplishments is what we heard read in church today. Paul gave an upside down series of his qualifications for boasting—his mistreatment including cruel public beatings, repeated imprisonment, and even stoning—to repeat just some of the things Paul came to endure, things most of us cannot imagine. Yet Paul knew the rest of the story—though his story is remarkable, it is not a story of a super human hero.

After the Bible story on Thursday, Carol ver Steeg told me what the real key to the story of Paul is—love. Paul came to understand that what mattered in life is how much God loves us. It began for Paul with the tough tenderness he experienced when Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus. Jesus loved Paul too much to let him keep hurting others—and by that misguided violence, truly hurting himself.

In that moment and throughout his life, Paul came to understand the special care God has for the vulnerable. When powerful people—usually religious or political leaders or their patrons—use their power to harm others instead of to protect them, God’s wrath comes. But God’s wrath is about more than punishing the offenders. It is a message that calls the powerful to see their power differently. That is what happened to Paul. That is why he could say, despite all of his accomplishments and heroic endurance, “If I am to boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Corinthians 11:30).

This is more than posturing or false humility for Paul. From the very beginning of his conversion and then throughout his life, Paul grew in his understanding that true strength comes from appreciating and attending to his own weakness as well as the weaknesses of others. If we come to share that same appreciation and grace, it will help us to change how we see the world-- and how we live. Today some of us may seek power so we can use it to get ahead or stay ahead. Yet if we experience a conversion like Paul’s, we will become less concerned with power and advancement and more concerned with increasing our self-awareness and our awareness of others-- especially those we may have ignored or dismissed in the past.

And for those of us who know we are weak and struggle with our weakness; those of us too often forgotten or diminished in our world; we can find hope that Jesus is with us and that he cares for us. We can trust that Jesus is working still today to confront and challenge the powerful, so they may be converted and see the world differently—to see the weak differently, to see themselves differently. And by grace, Jesus will help us all to live differently with one another—to live with appreciation for all God’s people and with kindness and a commitment to God’s reign of justice and the truth of God’s Word.

Next week, in chapter 23 of *The Path*, we will explore this topic of how we see weakness and power more fully in the letter of James. So heads up. Let me close with these words of the risen Jesus that he spoke to Paul as he was struggling with his “‘thorn in the flesh,’ perhaps a chronic illness:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:8). Amen.