

Sermon – 6th Pentecost
Galatians 1:11-24 and Mark 1:9-20
July 8, 2018

“The Book that is a Library – The Biography of Paul Section”

Acts 6 introduces us to a Jewish man named Stephen, who, Acts 6:5 says “*was full of faith and the Holy Spirit.*” He likely became a Christian on the day of Pentecost, and soon thereafter was chosen to be a deacon - which meant he tended to the needs of the poor. He was also a gifted preacher and eager to use that gift - a bit too eager for some. Acts 6:13 says he was accused of speaking ‘*against the Jews and the temple*’ and he was brought before the Jewish elders to explain himself. Acts 7 contains Stephen’s defense – a long speech on the history of the Jewish people from Abraham to Moses, to David and the prophets.

Stephen had obviously visited the library called the Old Testament – he knew its stories. But how he understood those stories now differed dramatically from his interrogators that day - one of whom was a man named Saul. Saul was young and brilliant and equally forceful of speech. But his faith was still the old faith – the faith of the Jews - a chosen people through whom the world would be blessed so long as that world learned and followed the traditions of the Jews. Stephen argued that Jesus replaced those traditions, fulfilling the law the Jews loved and earnestly tried but routinely failed to keep. Jesus, Stephen said, was a prophet yet more than that, the Messiah, the Savior of the Jews but even more still the Savior of the whole world.

Saul considered Jesus a fraud, a false prophet and the proof of that falseness was found in the same Old Testament from which Stephen so eloquently spoke. In his sermon, Stephen quoted Deuteronomy 18:15 where Moses says “*the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen.*” Saul and others very likely countered with Deuteronomy 18:20 which says “*but the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak...that same prophet shall die.*” To Saul Jesus was false because he was dead – and dead because he was false - God’s holy anger had been kindled against him – a sad but necessary event. Shortly thereafter Stephen with Saul’s approval was also dead.

It’s not hard then to imagine this Saul, now known as Paul, the Apostle of Christ Jesus, blinking his eyes to hide that terrible memory as he wrote to the church in Galatia about “*his former life.*” It’s not hard to imagine him remembering vividly Stephen with his dying breath, as Acts 7:60 records, saying “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*”. Where had we heard words like that before by the way? Paul didn’t have to bring all this up to the Galatians – but he did because he knew even as a Jew but all the more as a Christian that you have to confront your sins in order to contend with them. It is however quite astounding how a man as devoted to his Jewishness as Saul once was, full of righteous hatred of the followers of Jesus, in whose crusade Stephen was hardly the only casualty, becoming, aside from Jesus, the most influential figure of the Christian faith. But that is who Paul is.

The story of Paul's conversion is told in Acts 9 – the “road to Damascus” story. But if conversion is understood as the exchange of one religion for another, then there is a sense in which the term doesn't fit Paul. He never really ceased being a Jew. That is why in our reading from Galatians he doesn't shy away from that other part of his “former life” – saying almost with a chest swelling with pride how “*zealous he was for the traditions of his fathers.*”

But after meeting Jesus on that road, Paul, like Stephen, understood the Old Testament in a new way – as the cradle of Christ – with Israel's conflicted history the “labor pains” from which the Messiah Jesus was born. Paul never stopped loving his people the Jews, because he believed God would never stop loving them and the Old Testament said that plainly. What occurred in Paul is what he came to believe happens in every person who encounters the risen Jesus, in every person in whom God “*is pleased to reveal his Son*” – the motivation and purpose of life changes.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter had preached a sermon in which he called on listeners to “*repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Christ...for the promise is made to you and your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.*” The way in which the “everyone” promise was accomplished was through the writings of the early Christian leaders, of whom Paul is by far the most important. As you can see, his writings constitute nearly half of the New Testament. What are they about? An awful lot, so when you read them keep one thing in mind – one phrase that dominates Paul's thinking – that phrase being “*in Christ.*” You are “in Christ”, this congregation is “in Christ”, and what that means is that you are part of the way God chooses to relate to the world – by grace, with Jesus the supplier of that grace to you and the motivation for those “*in him*” to be an extension of grace to others.

Paul wrote things his own colleague Peter would say “*are difficult to understand.*” His books are actually letters written to address specific questions asked by Christians in communities where he had preached. He wrote about resurrection, his personal struggle with sin and temptation, the meaning of the Lord's Supper, marriage and sexual morals, charity and Christian attitudes about money, unity in the congregation, how Christians relate to government and non-Christians. But above all he wrote about the delight and at the same time the duty of being “in Christ.” But he always wrote from the standpoint of knowing how much he himself first received from Christ, how much had changed in him since he met Jesus before giving counsel on what living “in Christ” might mean for someone else.

Paul's biography, sprinkled throughout his books, but expressed most prominently in Galatians, presents a man who knew how much God had forgiven him, a man who was proud of his faith and certain of his testimony, and yet extraordinarily humble in living it all out, a man who teaches us that the motivation of life ought to simply be – “*let someone praise God because of you.*” AMEN