

11 August 2019

Inventing Church: Opportunity

Romans 3:21-30; Acts 16-19

The final chapters of the Book of Acts focus on the character of Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles. Our reading today comes from one of Paul's letters, a taste of his teaching. We read Romans 3, verses 21-30:

²¹But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

We continue our journey through the story of the Apostolic Church, as told in the Book of Acts. To catch up on what happened last week – “Previously on ‘Acts of the Apostles’!” – Paul and Barnabas went on a missionary journey through the area we now call Turkey, telling the good news first to Jews, then to Gentiles, and the Gentiles responded better. Then Paul and Barnabas went to a council in Jerusalem that had been called so as to decide what to do with the new Gentile Christians. Do they have to follow the Law of Moses or not? They came to a compromise: the Gentiles weren't required to follow *all* the law.

Anyway, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch in Syria, where they had begun their journey, and soon Paul said, “We should go back and check on the churches we started.” Barnabas replied, “I’ve been thinking about that, too. In fact, I’ve already asked my cousin Mark if he wants to join us again.”

Paul frowned. “Barnabas, Mark abandoned us last time, remember? He got homesick at Perga and went back to Jerusalem.”

“I know. I talked to him about that. He says it won't happen again.”

“He said it wouldn't happen the first time. Why do you want to take him anyway?”

Now Barnabas frowned. “I want to give him a second chance. It's what I do – give people second chances. Remember?”

Paul wasn't convinced, though, and the disagreement grew sharp enough that Paul and Barnabas split up. Barnabas and Mark went one direction, and Paul chose a man from Jerusalem

named Silas to be his new companion, and went a different way. We'll follow Paul and Silas now, and to help you keep up, here's a map.



Paul and Silas first visited the towns where Paul and Barnabas had been last time, encouraging the Christians there. At Lystra – the town where they had tried to worship Paul and Barnabas as Greek gods – they met a young man in the church there named Timothy. Timothy's mother was Jewish, but his father was Greek. What this probably meant was that both Timothy and his mother had been excluded from the synagogue, but the Christians, who both respected the Jewish scriptures and welcomed Gentiles, had become their new home. Paul was impressed with young Timothy, who had gifts that Paul did not, like – what's the word? – “tact” and he talked Timothy's mother into letting him go with them. One thing, though. Timothy had never been circumcised, and since Paul tended to start in each new town by going to the synagogue, he decided that needed to be done, and Timothy *really* wanted to go.

They visited all the towns Paul had been to before, and then decided to keep going, but at that point everything seemed to go wrong. Every direction they tried, something got in the way. Paul was getting more and more frustrated. Then Silas said, “You know, Paul, when God closes a door he opens a window,” and Paul decked him with his walking stick.

Okay, I made that last bit up. But if Silas, or anyone else, did say that to Paul, I *hope* he decked him.

By now the traveling party had added more companions, including Luke, the author of Acts. (We know that because at this point the narrative starts saying, “And then *we* went”) They ended up in the city of Troas, near the Aegean Sea, and during the night Paul dreamed that a man across the sea in Macedonia was calling for him to come and help them. The next day, they found a boat and headed across, coming eventually to an important Roman imperial capital called Philippi. There Paul met a wealthy businesswoman named Lydia, who heard his good

news and promptly invited them to make her home their base. It was a good start, and the church that was begun in Philippi was to remain close to Paul's heart for the rest of his life. This being Paul, though, it would be too optimistic not to expect some sort of civil disturbance, and one came. There was a slave girl in Philippi who had an unclean spirit in her – Luke, who was a physician, tends to say “spirit” rather than demon – and that spirit gave her certain fortunetelling gifts that had enriched her owners. After she had followed Paul around for a few days, calling out that Paul was a servant of the Most High God, Paul decided he didn't need that sort of publicity and cured her. Her owners, furious, had Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and thrown in jail.

That night, as Paul and Silas were staying up all night singing hymns and, no doubt, endearing themselves to the other prisoners, there was a major earthquake in Philippi. The prison walls sagged; the doors burst open; even the chains on the prisoners came free. The chief Roman jailer rushed in, saw the open doors, knew he'd be blamed for the prisoners' escape, and prepared to kill himself. Paul called out, “Hey, don't do that! We're all here!”

When the jailer saw that Paul was telling the truth, he sank to his knees. “Who are you people?” he asked. “And what do I have to do to become like you?”

“Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved,” Paul replied. “You and your whole household.”

That night, the Roman jailer's family was baptized into the Christian faith, and the next morning, the city magistrates dismissed all charges, with an official apology. The Philippian church, though, thought it might be best if Paul and his friends went on to the next town, Thessalonica. Here, Paul followed his usual pattern. He started by speaking to the Jews, who rejected him, then went to the Gentiles, some of whom accepted the good news, which angered the Jews so much that they ran Paul out of town. By now it's a familiar pattern, but the Jews of Thessalonica *really* disliked Paul and Christianity, because when they couldn't find Paul, they grabbed anyone they could find from the new church, dragging them to the city magistrates, screaming “These are those Christians, who are turning the world upside down!” Paul and his friends barely got out of town, but even that wasn't enough for the Thessalonian Jews. They followed the missionaries to the next town, Berea, and started a riot there, too.

Timothy and Silas took Paul aside. “We don't mean to be critical, or anything, but have you ever noticed that the riots only happen when you're around? We've been thinking that maybe we could stay on here and help the new church in Berea get established, and you could take a little vacation. Why don't you go to Athens? See the Acropolis? We'll join you later, all right?”

So it was that Paul went on alone to Athens, the center of Greek philosophy and literature for at least 400 years. Athens was where Plato and Aristotle had taught, where plays by Sophocles and Euripides had been performed. Those giants of philosophy and drama were long gone by this time, of course, but new schools of thought continued to be debated in public squares and up on the Areopagus – that is, the Hill of Ares, the god of war. The fashionable schools of thought just then were Stoicism and Epicureanism, but the Athenians were always willing to debate new ideas. It was their hobby. Of course, Athens was more than a place of philosophy and poetry. It was also a religious center. The city's name itself comes from the Greek goddess Athena, whose great temple loomed over the city from the Acropolis. But the

Athenians were nothing if not inclusive. They had shrines for every other god they could think of, too. This was the Athens that Paul arrived in.

He found a synagogue, of course, and went to argue with the Jews according to his custom, but in between Sabbaths he was left to wander around town. Soon he had struck up conversations with some of the Greek philosophers he met. Finding this Jew to be articulate and thoughtful, he was invited to a public forum up on the Areopagus, to explain his new ideas. Paul took his place in front of a crowd unlike any he had ever faced before.

“I’ve been walking around your city,” Paul said, “and I’m glad to see you’re very religious. So many altars and temples and shrines. I even found one dedicated ‘To a God Unknown.’ That’s sensible, I suppose. But in a way, that’s why I’m here. I want to tell you about that God Unknown, the God that is above every name, beyond every image, behind every idea, and vaster than any definition.

“I speak of the One God who created all and is Lord of all he created. This God Unknown is too large to fit in any shrine and too great to require any service offered by human hands, for there is nothing lacking in this God. Quite the opposite, this God gives to us, in unfathomable generosity, the very breath you breathe, the life that quickens your being, the world that gives you food and water and the very boundaries of your existence. This is the God who made you yourself, and who implanted in you that emptiness that looks for meaning. This is the God who sends you to the heights of philosophy and to the temples of religion, groping desperately for something. If you only knew, what you grope for is this God Unknown. But he can be found, for he is not only immeasurably beyond our understanding, but he is also as near as your every movement. As one of your own Greek poets puts it, ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’

“And I am also here to tell you that this God Unknown has now made himself Known and has called all people, wherever they grope for meaning, to turn to his true image, for this God came to earth as a man to heal the ages of ignorance, and to fix a day when all will be made right. This will take place through the mediation of this man, who was born, lived, and died, but whom God raised from the dead.”

It is a breathtaking sermon, tailored perfectly for his audience, and unlike any other sermon that Paul is recorded as preaching. He spoke to the Athenians in their own language of philosophy and poetry, but for one detail: the resurrection of Christ. In all the book of Acts there no sermon that omits that. And that was the point where the Athenians grew restless and started to sneer. A very few of the Athenians stayed to hear more, but the rest wandered away, looking for a new philosophy to play with.

From Athens Paul moved on to the thriving seaport of Corinth, still traveling alone, but once there he fell in with a couple of Jewish Christians named Priscilla and Aquila, who had recently moved to Corinth from Rome. They took Paul into their tent making business, and Paul, for his part, took them into his church planting line. By the time Silas and Timothy caught up with Paul in Corinth, he and Priscilla and Aquila already had a church going. Then they stayed there for a year and a half without Paul getting run out of town, a new record. It was probably while he was there that Paul began writing letters to churches he had started: one to the churches from the first missionary journey – that’s the book of Galatians – and a couple of encouraging notes to the church in Thessalonica, which was *still* being persecuted by the synagogue there.

After eighteen months, there was a bit of a riot in Corinth, which was *totally* not Paul's fault, but he decided to move on. To be honest, I suspect he was ready anyway. Some people are like that. He took Priscilla and Aquila with him and made his way back to Antioch by way of Ephesus, Caesarea, and Jerusalem.

We have spent all today focused on the figure of Paul, and I don't regret that. He was a genius – as creative and as infuriating as geniuses are apt to be. What he accomplished both in his church planting and the letters he wrote is astounding. But one reason we stress Paul so much is because the book of Acts, our primary source for the story of the early church, was written by one of Paul's companions. The church's story actually is larger than the story of Paul. You remember that Priscilla and Aquila, the Jewish Christians Paul met in Corinth, had recently moved there from Rome. Paul had never been to Rome, but there was already a church there. Someone else had started that one. Or again, Acts makes a brief mention of a Jew from Alexandria, in Egypt, named Apollos who shows up in Ephesus teaching about Christ, so there are churches in Africa, too. Meanwhile, other churches are being started in places ranging from Spain to India, all without Paul. Yes, Paul is a towering figure in the story of the church, but what we have by this time, only a quarter century after Christ's death and resurrection, is the beginning of a remarkable worldwide movement. That success will not come without a cost, though. But that's for next week.

A final thought: Those bad-tempered folks from the synagogue in Thessalonica had one thing right. Well, two things. First, they thought Paul was annoying, and that was accurate. But second, when they started a riot, calling for the arrest of Christians, they shouted, "These are those people who are turning the world upside down!" And we were. Like Jesus, our founder, we were challenging many of people's most cherished assumptions about life and faith and God. It would be hard to say that today, though. I'm not sure we even make waves, let alone turn anything upside down. I wonder why that is. And I wonder what we should be doing about it.