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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON October 2—'Evangelism: Paul's Paradigm' Acts 13:13-16, Acts 14:1-7

So far in our evangelism series we've covered the foundational idea of becoming a new creation and overcoming the fear of evangelizing.

Becoming a new creation is essential to both our personal faith and our sense of urgency in sharing the gospel. If we are in Christ, there is no option other than the transformation that leads us to becoming a new creation over and over again. If we believe in it fully, we also believe that every individual has the potential to become a new creation. This means that God can work wonders in anyone who chooses to allow it. Our task is to reach out to everyone and invite them into communion with us, and ultimately with Christ.

We noted that often the fear felt at evangelism is due to a misunderstanding of what evangelism looks like. The street preacher version is not the only version and arguably the least effective over the long term. The reality is that there is a mission field everywhere we go, and God has already equipped us to make connections with others through our talents, giftedness, interests and so forth. Essentially all we need to be is ourselves and pay attention to who and what is around us for opportunities to make connections and build relationships that are a vehicle for others to see Jesus in us and open doors of conversation about faith.

We recognized that often the people we feel most different from may need to hear about Jesus from us the most. The stigma around Christians is thick, and to have the embodiment of the bad defy it and exemplify the good is inspiring. Also, difference makes for lots of natural conversation. Questions about one another are abundant. So we change our lack of comfort to a curiosity about who someone is and learn about them. In the sharing of their story if we share ours, faith is an integral part of our own journey. The communication of it is natural.

Today we are going to look at a very Biblical sense of how evangelism works and works most effectively. We find no better resource for this than the apostle Paul.

Paul demonstrates that evangelism isn't a quick, one shot moment. It takes patience, persistence, and a willingness to embrace people where they are.

To grasp this, we first can look at where Paul was NOT effective. It's regarded that his time spent in Athens was not nearly as fruitful as it was in other cities where he ministered. Paul's words in Corinthians about the wisdom of God being foolishness to man and the strength of God being weakness to man is very likely rooted in his frustrations over his ineffectiveness there.

In Athens, we see Paul trying his hand at going toe to toe in the marketplace with other philosophers. This would be the equivalent of street preaching. People were looking to hear the different ideas of the day. In fact Luke remarks that this is the primary activity of the Athenians. They loved to listen to whatever idea was around, particularly whichever ideas were newest and freshest. This tactic wasn't entirely fruitless, but it wasn't as solid as his other way of doing evangelism.

In every city where Paul ministered, he began in the same place. He began in the synagogue. This may seem strange since he was the apostle to the Gentiles. Why would he go where the Jews are?

First, we need to understand that where there was a dominant Gentile population, meaning outside Jerusalem and Judea, there were Gentiles who had become interested and attracted to Jewish belief. They weren't Jews by ethnicity, and not necessarily even fully observant or likely to follow the rituals, but something about their God and what that was to cultivate in their character was appealing. So you would find Gentiles attending synagogue. They were called "proselytes".

Paul would go to the synagogue and he would reason with those gathered there. He would unpack the Old Testament scriptures and interpret them in light of Jesus. In the process he won both Jews and Gentiles to this fledgling Christian faith. Often he spent weeks, months, and even years in the same place getting to know the people, teaching them, building their faith up, and establishing new communities of faith.

There is another reason this was his starting point. Who was Paul?

He was a very learned pharisee. His strong suit was knowing the scriptures and the law. Paul could argue with the best of them and unpack scripture brilliantly and persuasively. He would stick to the synagogue largely until he'd persuaded who was going to be persuaded, and the rest got frustrated with his message and kicked him out. Then he'd often set up in a Gentile home or space and continue building a congregation.

Paul went to the place that played to his strengths. He went where there was already established common ground. He went to the place where he spoke their "language" and could break in to that group with ease and intelligence. There was already a foundation from which to work. In other words there was no extra effort needed to grease any wheels. They were already greased. In fact his preceding reputation in some ways may have made it even easier for him.

The significance is that he was most effective in the place where he was already strong. There was already a connection because of common ground. When he met Priscilla and Aquila, it wasn't because he went intentionally looking. They naturally came together because of common ground. They were all tent makers.

What made for a rich ministry was that he was going into the Gentile population. There was a natural diversity there. Different backgrounds and cultures that had been primed for the message he was bringing. Those who heard the message had their own friends, places of business and entertainment. As they embraced the message and life changing presence of Christ in their hearts, they were able to pass that along to those in their own circles. The growth of the early church wasn't only on the apostles. It happened because of the example and witness of the early Christians to the people in their own orbit.

The apostles got the ball rolling, but the community of believers made it snowball.

This is a much more whole grasp of what evangelism looks like. Paul's approach began communities of faith from scratch that grew and built up even in his absence. He also returned to tend what he had planted to ensure they stayed on the right track. This was through visits and the letters such as the ones we see in the New Testament.

Today we have the benefit of having our community of faith already established. We don't have to get it up and running. That was done long before our time. We are the body of believers now called to reach out and snowball what we have and grow our community.

Evangelism is a communal effort. We look for the lost wherever we find ourselves. We play to our strengths, already equipped by God. Our diversity is our strength as our individuality finds common ground with a greater multitude of people.

Working together, exemplifying Christ in word and deed, we continue to change the world by building the Kingdom of God one person and relationship at a time.

BIBLE STUDY Acts 23

We are in a place where on chapter rolls into the next fluidly. Each one seems to leave us on a sort of cliffhanger wondering what comes next in Paul's adventure. Chapter 23 has Paul sent to the governor, Felix, to have his case heard. Felix calls for the Sanhedrin to hear the accusations and now we get to once again see how they will try to set Paul up for a fall. There are some details that let us know a few things about this whole "hearing" experience. That it was only five days wait suggests that the Sanhedrin hadn't taken a whole lot of time to gather their case. This shows in the arguments they lay out before Felix. That the crew that accompanied Ananias were all on board to go after Paul suggests that they were likely Sadducees. Keep in mind that the ruckus that sent Paul to the governor was started because of a disagreement between the Pharisees and Sadducees over the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees had sided with Paul and so were unlikely candidates to come for this prosecution.

First their lawyer butters up Felix with many compliments about his leadership. The accusations against Paul all go to play to the compliments given. Praising him for his leadership, the peace that had been accomplished during his rule, and lifting up Felix's good name far and wide set up their suggesting Paul's actions run counter to Felix's interests and continued good run as governor.

This tactic is common among the unscrupulous and shady. Misrepresent someone you have it in for all the while cozying up to whomever has the authority to grant what you want. It's not about honesty or justice but about getting one's own way. When someone feels threatened, particularly in wealth or power, the reaction can be harsh to protect one's own self and livelihood. While it may be the way of the world there's no place for it in Christian living.

Paul is a "troublemaker". He threatens to disturb the peace that they praised Felix for. They use the term "ringleader" and that he is part of a "sect", painting him as being some figure in a malevolent almost cult like group. He is accused of attempting to desecrate the Temple. This is something not to be tolerated and explain why their reaction to him in

Jerusalem.

They accuse, then they encourage Paul to be examined.

Once again we see in Paul what can only be described as a supernatural calm. He knows he is innocent. He knows he's outnumbered. He knows he's being set up by the Sanhedrin. He also has to be relying on the strength and presence of the Holy Spirit to keep his head about him and a sense of calm and grace. His counter arguments are honest, sensible, and easily demonstrate that dishonesty of his accusers.

He gives his purpose for being in Jerusalem, to worship. He then encourages Felix to check out the charges with witnesses, all of whom he knows will bear out that everything he's accused of is false. Interestingly if the charges are so correct, it's interesting that none of the Ephesian Jews who were responsible for starting the whole mess were brought along to share their experience that apparently led them to take to Paul so aggressively.

Paul corrects the insinuation that he's somehow part of a troublemaking "sect". He clarifies that he is a follower of the Way which is at this point a known subset of Judaism. He identifies as observantly and fervently Jewish, believing in accordance with the Law and the Prophets. And he levels a statement that isn't necessarily accurate, that he agrees with them regarding the resurrection of both the righteous and unrighteous.

All of this paints him as a solid Jewish Roman citizen. In this blameless picture he paints, his claim to "strive" for clear conscience is a strong assertion that purity is a priority for him. The last thing he'd do is something to defile himself or the Temple.

Paul's final argument is a death blow to the Sanhedrin's. He recounts why he came back to Jerusalem, for worship and charity. In order to do this in the Temple he had to be ceremonially pure. On top of it he is engaging in charity which would have been of appeal even to the Romans.

Not only does he credit himself, but he discredits his accusers. He cites the Ephesians who caused the riot yet weren't bold enough to come along to render their charges. Since no genuine charge of note according to Rome had yet been leveled he calls out the Sanhedrin and cites the only thing they had against him which was the "resurrection of the dead" (and even the full Sanhedrin couldn't agree on that).

How does this turn out for Paul?? Sadly we see that just because someone has an airtight defense, it doesn't mean justice will be served.

Between his wife Drusilla and his understanding of The Way, meaning they were a benevolent sect of Judaism, not some dissident cult, Felix could certainly discern what was going on here. One might think it would be a slam dunk verdict on behalf of Paul. It wasn't. In fact there was no verdict at all. Felix simply kicked the can down the road to his successor Festus. Frustratingly this wasn't a few days or weeks. It was two years!

When we do what is right before God, there is no guarantee a broken world will acknowledge it, side with it, or give us fair treatment for it. Quite the opposite often when light is shed on darkness, the darkness gets angry. It fears being exposed. So it does what it can to squelch the light. If the light seeks the good of all, and the darkness the good of self, when the good of all overshadows what's best for self shady schemes and unfair treatment can emerge to ensure what's best for the self wins out. Even if everyone else loses.

We don't know for sure what all was going on with Felix, though we do know a few things. He was doing a favor to the Jews by keeping Paul under arrest. What favor? We don't know. Perhaps Drusilla as a Jew wasn't favorable to The Way, and knowing Paul was an effective missionary for that sect thought keeping him locked up would hurt their cause. Perhaps Felix was persuaded by the Sanhedrin's lawyer who stoked fear that a man like Paul might break the peace Felix had accomplished. Keeping Paul under lock and key for the duration took at least one player out of the equation that might tarnish his record.

What we do know is that Felix was greedy and corrupt. One of the reasons for Paul's lengthy incarceration was that he was seeking a bribe. Whatever means Paul possessed Felix wanted to tap that to line his pockets dangling the carrot of freedom before Paul.

Joke was on Felix. Paul was used to abuse, prison, and maltreatment. His faith and ministry were forged in those fires. Sacrificing personal integrity wasn't an option. This is the core of Paul's words in Philippians "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." The passage is about endurance. His faith in Jesus was such that no matter what circumstances would come, he remained uncompromising. This faith is inspiring and should be sought after. We too should aspire to unwavering faith amidst any challenge or persecution.

This greed is also likely at the root of Felix's fear at hearing the gospel message. It's less likely that Felix was in genuine fear of the fires of hell. Or that he regarded Paul as overly authoritative. His issue was a prick of conscience knowing that he wasn't going to give up that selfish ambition and greed for the sake of some new idea about God. Even if there were punishment in this world, his greed took precedence. Lending to this speculation is that Felix was known as a notoriously greedy person.

The two year time frame is significant only inasmuch as it was simply tied to Roman law concerning a Roman citizen. Two years was the maximum time a citizen could be imprisoned with out a verdict being rendered. Felix exhausted this time limit and passed the problem on to Festus.

Essentially what we see here is Felix playing the system. He's working things to his own advantage. Before getting to judge on him though, let's not forget that Paul also played the system to advantage. He played the Pharisees and Sadducees against each other to take pressure off of him at his hearing before the Sanhedrin. More than once he played his card as a Roman citizen to get out of some form of a bind.

The difference between the two is that Felix played the system offensively and with poor intention and motive. Paul played it defensively to save himself from unjust treatment and ultimately further the Kingdom of God. Once again we see a situation where the same tactic is used for different purposes. The problem may not be the tactic itself but rather how and why it is used. The state of our heart is always foremost and center in these circumstances. It is why Paul's witness to how the Holy Spirit can calm and direct our hearts and minds is so critical. Having the Holy Spirit as our compass helps ensure that if we are going to "play a system" or employ a strategy the motive and execution are in keeping with the integrity revealed in and desired by Christ.

What we are starting to see as this adventure unfolds is step by step leading Paul where we know he is bound. As his case continues to be appealed upwards, he is taken away from Jerusalem and towards Rome where he will ultimately meet his end.