

THE MAGNIFICENT JOURNEY

I Corinthians 1:13-25

EPIPHANY 3

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Soon after beginning my ministry among you in January of 1986, I received two invitations to come to a parishioner's house for dessert. I arrived at the first residence looking forward to sharing time with a couple who had been long-time members. Needless to say, I was surprised to be greeted by a roomful of 'older members,' whose message to me was clear —DO NOT MAKE ANY CHANGES! I remember telling them I would be a transactional leader, keeping things the way they were for at least a year, until I got my feet wet, so to speak.

The following week, I attended another dessert, also with a crowd of unmentioned guests. This was a much "younger" gathering, and this group emphatically listed the changes I had to make, or else some of them would be leaving the congregation. I responded to this group by telling them in due time, once I got a handle on things, I would become a transitional leader as we grew together as a congregation into the future. That night, I called my wife, who was still back in Bel Air, Maryland with our then two children Jennifer and Bill, and told her, "It looks like I'm going to be an interim pastor at Grace."

Well, I guess I was right in a way. The interim period lasted 34 years. Some interim . . . some period . . . some 34 years. All pastors by nature are interim pastors. That's what the apostle Paul experienced as a pastor. I had that thought in mind as I sat down in my home study to write this sermon. With the bulletin already printed with its colorful cover portraying Matthew's Gospel text of Jesus calling his first disciples on a magnificent journey (eventually taking Him to the cross), I changed my mind, and turned instead to the Epistle lesson and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. To that which was already read, I would like to add

the passage which immediately follows (verse 18): ***“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.”*** A few verses later, in verses 22-24, Paul adds: ***“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.”***

Through my years with you, I have learned much from Paul. In recent years, I have led Bible studies on most of the Pauline epistles, ending last fall with Romans. Paul, formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, was the first theologian in the Christian Church. For pastors of my generation, Paul was the most influential preacher for shaping our preaching theologically. In every generation, men and women of God have emerged as theologians, pastors who have disciplined themselves to guard us from misunderstandings, from being distracted by moralistic bullying or sentimental trivialism. Preaching must be anchored in God, God’s revelation to us in the Scriptures. In cultures teeming with competing gods and goddesses and misconceptions about our Christian faith, we pastors need all the help we can get. The consensus of the Church since its formation is “Begin with Paul.”

As some of you know who have been around the office lately, my study is in the process of being broken down and removed. Actually it looks like a tornado struck it. The custom-made bookshelves, constructed by an Amish craftsman named Samuel Stoltzfus, were ordered by the Church Council to replace the rickety, pre-Ikea shelves that were sagging under the weight of accumulating books, now stand empty. There was a time I used to fear being buried in an avalanche of books. So the shelves that had once displayed my pastoral tools, ordered sectionally from Biblical commentaries, theologies and histories on one wall, to practical books on spirituality, leadership, preaching, pastoral care and counseling on the adjoining wall, now stood in piles, ready to be boxed up and taken by SUV to a storage facility near our home. During this month-long process, I have felt like an archaeologist, digging and sifting through cultural debris, until I came across some old seminary class notes on Paul. I thought they might be instructive on this occasion marking my retirement and departure.

What I could discern from almost fifty-year-old yellowed pages inked in hieroglyphics was that four elements formed Paul's theological imagination. These elements are basic to forming our communication as theological pastors-preachers. I can still hear echoes of the German-accented New Testament scholar, Gerhard Krodel, as he lectured to us in old Herges Hall at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. The first element is Paul's submission to Scripture. All of my preaching comes out of study and submission to Scripture. Submission is the operative word here. For me, it is my spiritual position when praying to and serving God. It was helpful during my hospitalization and surgery last summer at Cooper Medical Center. One of the nurses, who was surprised that this was my first hospitalization for a person of my age, also commented on my calm and composed nature. I chalked it up to my ability to submit mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

One doesn't read Paul's letters very long before realizing that Paul is not an independent thinker, figuring things out on his own. Nor is he a speculative thinker, tinkering with theological ideas, searching for some novel ultimate truth. His thinking is subordinated to all that God revealed through the Law and the prophets, and ultimately in the Person of Jesus the Christ. Scripture for Paul was the Hebrew Bible that we now designate as the Old Testament. As he writes his letters, Paul's thinking is highly attuned to Scripture. All of his mental processes are subdued and submissive to what has been handed to him by revelation in Scripture. The words of Scripture are the means by which Paul prays, thinks, and preaches. Martin Luther had this same quality and, thus, an affinity to and an affection for Paul.

Paul's relation to Scripture was not as a student boning up for an exam, but as a disciple of Jesus living the text. He spent the first part of his life as a Pharisee, using the Scriptures zealously, but unlovingly. He spent the second part of his life as a Christian and an apostle, living these same Scriptures zealously, but lovingly. The Difference was this. As a zealous Pharisee, he used the Scriptures to support an angry crusade against Christians. As a believing Christian, he let the Holy Spirit use the Scriptures to form Christ in him. He submitted to them. In Romans

alone, as we learned in our study, Paul employed seventy quotations, cited from seventeen of the thirty-nine Old Testament books available to him (Isaiah with twenty citations, and the Psalms with fifteen of his favorites). But he also covered most of the territory between Genesis and Malachi. Paul not only quotes, he inhabits God's story. The Scriptures have become for him, as one commentator put it, "all autobiographical."

A second characteristic of Paul's theological imagination is his extravagant embrace of mystery. It is a temptation for preachers to think they have to explain everything. Paul is comfortable with mystery. He delights in and accepts mystery. Listen to one of his celebrative outbursts in Romans: "***O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!***" (11:33). Mystery is inherent in the very nature of God and God's works. As the Spirit forms the life of Christ in us, we encounter a God who is more than we can grasp, more than we are capable of explaining. God's Word is not classified information from which lay people are excluded, it is an open invitation to live in a world larger than our sin-cramped selves. The mystery Paul embraces is not the mystery of darkness that must be dispelled, but the mystery of light that may be entered now and at our life's end. It takes considerable humility to embrace mystery, for in the presence of mystery, we are not in a position to control anything, or pose as authorities.

Another element conspicuous in forming Paul's theological mind and imagination is his use of language. Quoting in Romans from Deuteronomy, Paul writes: "***The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.***" And Jesus, of course, is the Word. The way Jesus and Paul use language is to load it with metaphor. Jesus does it with His amazing and reflective parables. For Paul, there is hardly a paragraph he writes that lacks a metaphor. For a right-brained person like myself, metaphor suits me. Instead of pinning down meaning, metaphor lets it loose. Metaphor does not so much define or label, it expands, forcing me to go deeper. We cannot be passive before a metaphor. We use imagination and enter into it. Metaphor enlists us in a believing-obeying participation. A living faith requires a lively, participatory language. I have learned not to serve up God's word after I have dissected it and placed it under a microscope. Instead, I use

words not to define, but to evoke, like Paul does. To use a metaphor, I like to listen with my so-called ‘third ear,’ not only to ‘not miss’ what a person is saying, but also ‘not to miss the person who is speaking.’

A fourth and final element in Paul’s imagination is that it comes to us in letters written to individuals, groups, and churches, who worshiped in places that can still be located on maps. A letter was the most personal way for Paul to write words. It has become a lost art today in our texting, tweeting world. Paul’s theological imagination enabled him to keep the soaring truths and beauties of the Gospel of Jesus Christ accessible and understandable to the very sinner-saints that gather still in our congregations — the extraordinary and the ordinary, the healthy and the sick, children and elderly, skeptics and believers. For me, Paul becomes alive in our liturgies and prayers, at baptisms and funerals, in conversations and classes. Theology is not talking about God, but living in community with persons in relationships who, like Paul, live in communities whose names they know.

As a postscript and an ending, beloved people of God, using this term of endearment one last time, Paul brings people by name into his theology. Paul knew his audiences and knew them by name. In his letters, he remembered them, reminded the, guided them, greeted them, prayed for them, loved them. As your pastor, it has been important to know your name, to greet you by it, to administer the sacrament to you by it, to say it for the first time at baptism and for the last time at a committal service. Your names are emblazoned in my head and heart. You will always be a part of me. It has been a privilege to serve in this congregation and in our New Jersey Synod these past 34 years. Today, I leave you, not bereft, but hopefully richer, because of our cherished memories together as the beloved people of God, who have gathered, worshiped, served, shared, and studied in this place and community called “Grace.”

AMEN