

Ask any lector around here who has ever drawn one of those long, unpunctuated run-on sentences from one of St. Paul's letters and they will tell you how hard he can be to understand. As a preacher, I find that Paul's letters present a further challenge: in contrast to Jesus in the Gospels, Paul sounds more "preachy"—not necessarily in the positive sense of that word. Jesus told parables and stories; Paul makes complex theological arguments. He tends to be more abstract, rather than concrete. Reading these letters is like reading someone else's mail, and the only way to find meaning is to do some detective work, by uncovering the stories behind the texts that were obvious to the first hearers of those letters.<sup>1</sup>

A further challenge for us in trying to understand Paul is that we tend to see him across the chasm of the Reformation. It makes a difference in how we "see" Paul if we view him through "Protestant" lenses or "Roman Catholic" lenses. This is especially true about Romans and we can get stuck there—essentially re-arguing those big Reformation questions—which were important at the time but may not be the most pressing questions the Church is facing today. How then, might we open ourselves up to try to meet Paul again for the first time, in order to truly hear "good news" in an epistle like Romans, from which we'll be reading over the course of next twelve weeks? I hope that over the course of this summer we can try to put on a different set of lenses, and try to re-situate Paul in his own first-century context: to try to see him again as a faithful Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin.

Toward that objective, let's begin with Paul's hometown of Tarsus. Think about the impact of place on your own life, especially during your most formative years. It makes a difference whether you grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania or the south-side of Chicago! How has that particular place shaped the person you are today, and left its mark on you? How does it continue to shape the way you see the world? Tarsus no doubt left its mark on Paul. It was at the crossroads between the eastern and western worlds, making it pretty cosmopolitan. Located near the Mediterranean, it was a thriving place where hard work was rewarded. And it was a kind of college town: think Cambridge or Amherst. We might say that you can take the boy out of Tarsus, but you can't take Tarsus out of the boy; and it seems clear that Paul remained pretty comfortable with multiculturalism, was extremely hard working, and was also highly educated.<sup>2</sup>

Paul also alludes in some of his letters to a recurring problem; what he calls a "thorn in his side" that stayed with him his whole life. Scholars have long speculated about what that might have been, often telling us much more about themselves in the process than about Paul. Most of us deal with our own "thorns," so projection is easy enough to understand. But it seems to me that a theory at least as credible as any I've read is that perhaps Paul suffered from chronic malaria, since malaria was rampant in Tarsus. The recurring symptoms would have included profuse sweating and fevers and vomiting and severe headaches that would have come and gone over the course of Paul's entire lifetime. We can't know for sure, but as a theory it reveals a "shadow side" of being from Tarsus.<sup>3</sup>

If I were to give you a quiz today, and ask you about Paul's "conversion," my bet is that most of you would tell me something about the story we get second-hand from Luke in Acts: Paul became a changed man on the Road to Damascus. He had been persecuting the Church, but then he had this

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<sup>1</sup> See Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*, to whom I am profoundly indebted in this sermon.

<sup>2</sup> See here, too, Borg and Crossan.

<sup>3</sup> Borg and Crossan.

dramatic encounter with the risen Christ. He was blinded, but then he saw. He repented, and then became a Christian; going on to then write all those letters, including Romans.

But when Paul tells us about his faith journey in his own words, in a first-person narrative in the eleventh chapter of Galatians (1-17) —his autobiographical version turns out to be a lot less dramatic than Luke’s story. After his encounter with the risen Christ, he tells us that he went away to think and ponder and pray about what had happened to him for *three years*. He then emerged to have a heart-to-heart with Peter and James in Jerusalem, and then he goes away for another *fourteen years* before beginning his public ministry. The point here is simple—it’s not that you can’t integrate these stories, but rather that Luke tends to focus on the dramatic event (and we do too)—while Paul’s own story seems to focus on the lengthy period of discernment and trying to sort it all out and live into it.<sup>4</sup>

Even if there was a sudden, dramatic turn—an “epiphany” that occurred at a datable moment in time—*conversion* happens over a much more extended period of time. For today, my point is simply to remind us that Paul was a complex figure, and even when we think we know him, he may deserve a second look. There’s always another angle into the story. Some of us may love what we think we know of him and others of us may not. We may have a favorite letter of his, or an idea we’ve latched onto as going to the heart of the gospel he proclaimed—or we may have already dismissed him as a misogynist. But Paul seems to have been a far more elusive and enigmatic character, even in his own day and I think we gain something by owning that and stepping back a bit. If we can keep our eyes and ears open over the course of these next few months, we may learn something new.

Paul was a “church planter.” He would go and start a new congregation in a place like Corinth or Thessalonica and then organize them into house churches, educate them for ministry for a year or so, and then move on to the next city where he would do the same thing all over again. From time to time he’d correspond with these communities and send along his greetings and pastoral advice, especially when things started to get out of hand. *Paul had a lot of experience with church conflict*. All of his other letters in the New Testament were written to congregations that he knew, and that knew him; and you see this in the informal parts of his letters when he says things like, “tell Chloe I said hey!”

Romans is different, though. This letter was probably written *from* Corinth, but it’s addressed to people that Paul had not met before, although he does tell them he would like to get there someday and thinks about doing so often. (See 1:11-15) Clearly, Paul knew something about the Church in Rome and they knew something about him. Even so, Romans is a kind of letter of introduction; some scholars have even described chapters 1-8 as Paul’s “theological last will and testament.” Paul is telling them how the gospel has changed his life and changed the way he sees the world; and he is suggesting some ways that it might change them also.

Enough, for now, about Paul. Let’s talk a bit about the people at the receiving end of this letter, living in first-century Rome: the imperial, administrative, and economic capital of the world. Think Washington, DC and New York wrapped up into one. The people who came to be followers of Jesus there, setting up small house churches composed of both Jewish and Gentile Christians, still lived and worked and were educated in this Roman context. They were shaped by Rome—not Tarsus, not Holden. The Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians there coexisted in a rather uneasy relationship that often involved misunderstanding and stereotyping of the other group. First-century Jews had been

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<sup>4</sup> See Brother Kevin Hackett’s sermon at: <http://ssje.org/sermons/?p=856>

taught to divide the world into basically two groups: Israel, i.e. God's *chosen* people, and everybody else—the nations, the *goyim*. Usually the “everybody else” tended to be bigger and stronger nations like Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and most recently, Rome. When you tend to divide the world into “us” and “them” and when you are weak and they are strong, that brings with it a whole worldview that is hard to let go of. Gentiles also tended to divide the world into “us” and “them” but the lines were drawn very differently. For Gentiles, the world was divided into *civilized people*, who were cultured and educated, and *barbarians* (which literally means ‘bearded’) who were not. That latter group included, but was not limited to, Jews.<sup>5</sup>

So imagine for just a moment what it would be like to be a member of one of those first-century house churches in Rome: a congregation consisting of people shaped by each of these competing worldviews. Imagine Darius, a “civilized” Gentile- Christian who has been raised to look down his Roman nose at those uncultured barbarians, sitting at a brown-bag lunch and eating his totally un-kosher prosciutto on ciabatta bread sandwich. Next to him sits Moshe, whose grandmother would be turning over in her grave if she knew he was sitting next to *goyim* swine. Imagine them and their family members trying to plan the menu for the annual parish picnic, make decisions together on vestry, or choose music for worship, and you are quickly relieved of any naïve sense that the early Church was free of conflict where everyone sat around holding hands and singing “kumbaya! Diversity (in the first and twenty-first centuries) holds within it the seeds of radical transformation, to be sure. But working through old prejudices is difficult and challenging work and we should never underestimate the very real challenges that these Christians in Rome faced. When Paul tells the Church in Rome that there is no longer Jew or Greek, he means it; but he’s talking to people who know just how hard it is to live into that reality.

Paul’s theology is not the abstract systematic theology of a tenured religion professor—not that there is anything wrong with that! Paul’s theology is always contextual: scripture, reason and tradition intersect with a particular context, in this case those house churches in first-century Rome. He is a pastoral theologian; his theology is more like “theological reflection” that is rooted in the everyday challenges of congregational life, of trying to live into the call to be “in Christ.” The language and metaphors for this reflection are rooted in Paul’s life as a faithful Jew, trained as a Pharisee. (Remember that for Paul, “the Bible” means the Old Testament, period; not the gospels which would be written later and not these letters of his which it would be hard to imagine he saw as on the same level as “the Law and the Prophets.”)

*“Romans was written to be heard by an actual congregation made up of particular people with specific problems.”*<sup>6</sup> Over the course of these summer weeks, see if you can find the time to simply sit down and read the whole letter in one sitting. And then as we continue to hear these readings that come to us from Romans, over time, we might try to see our way beneath the texts to those real people. Paul reminds them, and us, of the love of God—and that nothing in all of creation can separate us from that love. He challenged them, and us, to confess that “Jesus is Lord” and then to live that way.

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<sup>5</sup> See A. Katherine Grieb’s *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God’s Righteousness*. I am profoundly indebted to Dr. Grieb for many of the thoughts and ideas of this sermon.

<sup>6</sup> Grieb.