

Sermon for Sunday, April 28, 2024

Acts 18:1-4

1 Corinthians 1:101-8

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the course of the next eight weeks we are going to spend time in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. We will experience his teaching and guidance to this church and consider how his words might apply to our life in this modern era.

Since we are starting in a new book of the Bible, let's begin with the verses from Acts 18 to help us to understand the context of Corinth. Later we will move to the passage from 1 Corinthians and think about two topics that come out of that writing. I will leave it to you to draw parallels and comparisons with today's world.

1. Beginning with Acts: It's easy to skim right over the phrase in verse 2, "because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome." The emperor Claudius did force an exile upon Jewish persons around 50 CE. Seeing that it's about 20 years after Jesus ascended into heaven the followers of Jesus (Christians) were still a pretty small group and mostly Jewish. One historical record states that the Jews were forced to leave Rome because of an uproar over the worship of someone named *Chrestus*. People have long assumed that this was a reference to Jesus Christ. *Imagine being forced into exile because of a religious belief, especially when it was primarily an internal disagreement over that belief. A close look at the news and you will see that religious persecution still occurs.*
2. Priscilla and Aquilla were tentmakers and somewhere along the line they had also become believers in Jesus. We simply don't know if they became believers in Rome or in Corinth. Their knowledge would certainly have advanced under Paul's tutelage as they worked together making tents. Priscilla and Aquilla later move to Ephesus. Priscilla is always mentioned first, and from that we imagine that she was the more capable of the two especially in matters of teaching Christian faith. We are reasonably certain that they establish a church in Ephesus. *Sadly, modern day church teaching often and conveniently overlooks the fact that Priscilla is female and a leader; that she has skills that Paul values as the gospel of Jesus is shared.*

3. It may be an accurate translation to say that "Paul argued in the synagogue" each week but the word *argue* conveys strong disagreement. It is better to think of it as debate. Debate over the meaning of Scripture was then and is still important. People gathered in the synagogues on the Sabbath to worship and pray. But they also considered debate over Scripture verses a form of worship as they sought always to find an ever deeper understanding of God. *Debate over the meaning of Scripture continues to this day as it should, for are we not always striving for our own deeper understanding of God?*
4. Corinth: I have heard it described as "the Las Vegas" of the Roman empire. The city was located on a narrow stretch of land called an isthmus that was about 4 miles wide. This stretch of land connected the mainland of Greece with a large peninsula called the Peloponnesse. This location meant that an enormous amount of trade and commerce took place in its vicinity. There were roads that ran north and south. It was far easier in those days to pull a ship out of the water and roll it across the isthmus than to sail around the lower peninsula. So trade goods, sailors, and ships were also moving east to west. This city was *cosmopolitan* and filled with transients: people moving from "here to there." It could be said, "What happens in Corinth, stays in Corinth!" It would be easy for people to behave in immoral or unscrupulous ways there knowing that it wouldn't become known at home. *And that NEVER happens today, now does it?*

These comments are intended to enhance your understanding of the Scripture readings for today. It is into this city that Paul ventures to share the gospel message of Jesus' life, death on a cross, and resurrection.

Now let's turn to the passage from Corinthians. Paul moved about extensively over the years of his missionary journeys. Once he felt that a church was solidly established he would move on. It is inevitable that questions would arise within that established church about how to live and worship as followers of Jesus. Paul would write letters in response to those questions. But remember that we don't know what the actual questions were nor the specific circumstances. We have to be careful as we read so as to avoid judgment.

In today's passage from Corinthians there are two topics that are striking. The first topic is baptism. Someone once asked me if Paul is saying that baptism is NOT important. The short answer is no. Paul's argument is that the person who PERFORMS the baptism is not important. In other words, to make the claim that being baptized by a bishop is better or more special than being baptized by a common pastor in a little neighborhood church is false. It's not about who. It's about the fact that the act has occurred.

So, why do we baptize? Once again the short answer is because Jesus commanded it: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We Lutherans consider baptism to be one of two sacraments. Sacraments are sacred moments when humans combine an earthly element like water with the words/command of Jesus and trust in God's promise to be present and to act.

Jews were practicing baptism even before John the Baptizer appeared on the scene. Baptism was by total immersion and quite public. At that time the primary purpose was to demonstrate repentance. The person being baptized was publicly claiming that they were going to turn away from the ways of living that were perceived as sinful and turn with more determination toward living a life following God. John the Baptizer's rites of baptism had the same motive at the core. However, John was clear that part of his purpose was to prepare the way for Messiah. He was telling people that the long awaited messiah was going to come SOON.

As we fast-forward over the time of Jesus to the time of Paul we must remember that the vast majority of people who were baptized were adults. There is strong evidence that when the head of a household was baptized, the entire household was also baptized: this would include the children, the babies, AND the slaves.

As you are likely well aware, there is a difference between denominations in regard to when someone should be baptized. Some say that baptism should occur when a person reaches a point of making a decision—believer's baptism. And yes, there are many stories in the book of Acts where adults request to be baptized. Other denominations baptize at any age, including infants. We Lutherans baptize at any age in part because we believe that in the sacrament of baptism God acts. In baptism God claims that person and adopts them into God's family. It doesn't matter who performs the sacrament because they are merely the conduit through which

God acts. God's adoption is irrevocable—it cannot be broken by any earthly power.

The second topic coming from the reading for today is the cross. Paul states emphatically that the cross—an instrument of torture and a means for controlling the population—is all that matters. Wherever the Romans needed to maintain control they would certainly have utilized public crucifixion. The fact that Jesus died on a cross would have been utterly astonishing to Paul's audience. And then they would have started asking questions, like why? Why was Jesus crucified? What did he do? And the short answer was nothing—except to challenge the prevailing religious practices that caused so many to be disconnected from right worship of God.

My friends, the cross is all that matters. To return for a moment to the divisions that exist within denominations and churches: the cross is all that matters. Over the last 2000 years we humans have gotten into huge arguments over tiny ideas. Returning to the debate over the age for baptism: if age was important, wouldn't Jesus have left the disciples with a word of guidance?

Every Christian community regardless of denomination, needs to keep their eyes on the cross and by extension on the one who died on that cross for us. Out of love Jesus died so that we might live. Out of love he underwent an excruciating death, not as a sacrifice to cleanse us from our sins, but as a demonstration of the extent to which God would go to show us how deeply we are loved.

The challenge with keeping our eyes on the cross is that we still have to figure out how to live in the next hour, the next day, and the next week. Over the next seven weeks we will walk through Paul's letter to the church in Corinth as he guides them in figuring out how to live in an enormously diverse community. It wasn't easy for them. Sometimes it's not easy for us. But we can rest first on the assurance that we are members of God's family. We can rest on the knowledge that God loves us. We can rest on God's promise to be with us always. And as we will sing at the end of our worship service today, we can always "Lift High the Cross." Amen.