

Sunday, June 3, 2012
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This week I will be starting a summer preaching series on the Letters of Paul. Each week we will read something from the Acts of the Apostles (as Larry just read) that will introduce us to Paul's life and experience as an apostle. We will explore the letters in the order they are printed in the Bible – which is not the order in which they were written. We will focus on the seven letters that scholars attribute directly to Paul: Romans 1 & 2, Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. We will reserve the remaining six letters, attributed to Paul's followers and referred to as the deutero-Pauline or inauthentic letters for another time.

Later this month we will revisit the sermon/dialogue format that we started last summer.

Today, we will start with a reading from Paul's letter to the Romans 12:1-21.

Sermon - "New Life In Christ"

Today, we begin our study of the Apostle Paul and his early church.

I chose to start with the reading from Acts of the Apostles, Luke's account of Saul/Paul's conversion.

This dramatic story of Jesus breaking into the life of one so opposed to his teachings reminds us of God's amazing power.

On the road to Damascus Paul experienced more than a conversion to Christianity – he was transformed from an enemy to an apostle. The word apostle implies three things:

1. You must be sent by someone else.
2. You must be sent on a particular mission.
3. You must be sent with sufficient power to accomplish the mission.

Paul was indeed sent by Jesus to bring the good news of salvation to Gentiles and Jews alike.

His mission, from this day forward, never wavered.

Remember Saul was a man pursuing Jesus-followers with tremendous zeal.

Once he became a Jesus-follower, he applied that same ardor to spreading the gospel.

The power that Paul demonstrates as he builds the church is unimaginable to Saul the persecutor.

He will go on to open people's hearts and minds to the presence of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a way that still resonates with us today.

Paul is one of the most-studied figures in church history.

He is perhaps the one most often misquoted – or partially quoted to make social/political points.

For example, his admonition for women to be silent in worship has been interpreted over the years as misogyny-hatred of women. In reality, Paul involved women in the church from the start and welcomed them into leadership roles.

Many of his early supporters were women who heard his message of grace and became Christians.

His stands on slavery, sexuality, patriarchy, and social class are all worth exploring.

It is important, however, that we listen to his words, both in the context of the time they were written (about the year 50) and the reality of our cultural landscape today.

“Paul’s ministry was governed by a driving sense of accountability to God—the legitimate expectation of having to give an account, an explanation, or a justification to God for a deed or an attitude.

His goals had an intensely communal orientation.

Paul labored to create the beloved community, the *ekklesia*, in the midst of the real and present dangers of the Roman Empire.

He was an educated Jew and considered himself a practicing Jew throughout his life.

Paul believed that the gospel was not an abstract concept but a powerful event embodied through practice.

He travelled extensively, bringing the gospel to foreign lands.

He was one of the first to pay close attention to diversity and to extend an extravagant welcome.

He believed that a church was a community of persons called together by the gospel.

One Pauline scholar said, “Paul’s ethical admonitions concerning communal life were not exercises in self-righteous pleading. They were constant reminders that people’s vertical love for God (that’s between you & God)

Cannot be separated from their horizontal love for their neighbors.” (between you & you)

Today is the last Sunday in the first half of the Church Calendar.

From November to June we have journeyed through the events of Christ's human life and explored the meaning of the God who became flesh, and the Reign of God, which Jesus preached and practiced.

Trinity Sunday is the final Sunday in this journey, reminding us that we encounter God as Creator, Redeemer and Empowerer.

It is fitting, therefore, to begin our exploration of Paul today for he believed that there were facets or agents within God's being who demonstrated particular characteristics or carried out particular functions.

Though centuries away from a doctrine of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit was a central reality in Paul's life and Letters.

For Paul, Jesus Christ revealed God, participated in God's divinity, and played the central role in the redemption of the world.

The Holy Spirit revealed God, participated in God's divinity, and played the pivotal role in empowering believers to embody the truths of the gospel.

For Paul, the Spirit was truly God in action.

In his letter to the Romans he says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us." Poured into our hearts – beautiful imagery that calls on us to embody, to visibly live our faith.

Romans is the longest and most complex of Paul's letters, written toward the end of his ministry around the year 58.

It follows the same general pattern as his other correspondence. There is an opening section where Paul introduces himself and his key message, and a closing section where he explains his travel plans and sends greetings.

In between, the main body of the letter has two basic parts: a teaching section and a practical section that describes how this teaching should be followed in everyday life.

Our passage today, chapter 12 kicks off the practical section.

I love this particular passage for its clarity.

Paul's instructions are easily followed.

When I read them I think, "We can do this!"

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed.

One of the things I strive for in building this beloved community is the transformation of lives. I do not want anyone to ever feel they must conform to any particular way of thinking, acting, participating or even dressing to belong. We come to this place to be changed – to be different than the world would have us be.

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think

Do you? Do you ever think of yourself more highly than you ought? This is one of those insightful questions that you can ask yourself at the end of each day.

Was there any time today when I thought of myself more highly than I ought.

This simple check will do wonders to keep you humble.

For as one body we have many members

This is the definition of church, of community, of ekklesia.

We need each other.

We must recognize that our own gifts and talents cannot possibly carry us through life.

A good, strong, vital organization is one that celebrates the gifts that each person brings, finds a way to use those gifts and celebrates the idea that we are intricately interconnected.

Let love be genuine

Genuine, real, honest – these are the hallmarks of a healthy relationship-strive for these things in your family, in your work, in relationship with yourself.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering.

Language is so powerful-context can change everything.

Listen to how you describe your day to your family, or your illness to your friends, or your church to your neighbor.

Is it hope and joy that people feel when they talk to you?

Is patience a word that others would use to describe you?

If not, you are a good candidate for transformation in Paul's church.

Never avenge yourselves

This admonition frees one of tremendous responsibility – leave the vengeance up to God.

O Thanks God – I don't have to worry about making the whole world right, or holding everyone accountable for their weaknesses and mistakes-I will gladly leave that up to you!

Overcome evil with good.

The world will be better, safer, more peaceful if we commit ourselves to overcoming evil with good.

This week, I invite you to take a moment and reread Paul's letter to the Romans – just chapter 12. Maybe read it together as a family. Think about it, talk about it.

Challenge yourselves to live up to these words.

This summer I hope that you will come to church.
I hope that you will stay connected.

I hope that you will be transformed.

I hope that together, we will learn to love the apostle Paul and the God that he so devotedly served.