

SPG#227, Conversion of St. Paul

January 24, 2010 - Charles M. Pope

Acts 26:9-21

Galatians 1:11-24

Matthew 10:16-22

It was inevitable that we would again stand with Saul before the blinding light on the Road to Damascus when the direction of his life changed dramatically. It was inevitable because he is our namesake. Every year at this time we celebrate the Conversion of St. Paul in conjunction with our Annual Meeting. It was inevitable because material in the scripture written by St. Paul and written about St. Paul is plentiful. For all of you who have been members of this parish for many years, you have heard many sermons on the Apostle Paul. Both Peter and Paul get two feast days in the church year. Besides today, the Conversion of St. Paul, there is a day for the Confession of St. Peter. And beyond that, there is a day for Saints Peter and Paul.

I guess we could say that it is challenging in that we get overdosed on St. Paul, and it is too bad that we have to go over the same things time and again. But I think working with Paul and his writing is challenging in a different way. The words he has written in his epistles were written so as to affect the people who read them. From the earliest times of the Church, his epistles were read in the liturgy. From my own study, when he wrote his epistles, I think he knew that they would be read repeatedly. But I think he hoped that people would still be affected, even in the repetition. They are very powerful words. St. Paul is one of the most provocative, radical, and controversial writers in the whole scripture. It is our challenge to let his words be to us what he intended.

And today, the specific challenge, is to appreciate the story of the blinding light in the context of his other writings. Then it is possible to come away with an unsettling, but perhaps truer picture of the man who is our namesake.

Paul disagreed with the Jerusalem Church over the treatment of Gentiles. He thought they should be openly welcomed.

From 1 Corinthians 13, words attributed to Paul: **Love is patient. Love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

In Paul's letter to the Philippians is written, **Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.**

Countless Christians, over the centuries, have been inspired by the reading and re-reading of the words of Paul. But also in the thirteen epistles in the New Testament are words attributed to him that we find unsettling. We find words of condemnation for sexuality that contrasts with heterosexuality. We find the words that long hair degrades a man, but that long hair is a woman's glory. We find words that women should be silent in the church. But we also read these words in Romans, **I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a Deacon in the church at Cenchrae.** We have, for the most part, allowed Paul to be a person of his times. And we have allowed him to reflect some of the gender inequality of those days.

And we have allowed that he was a first century Jew, which included prescriptions regarding hair styles and dress. But even with those allowances, we find some of what he says troubling and unsettling.

I can recall several times as a young man, giving up on trying to construe Paul to be as nice as I would like for him to be.

One thing is for certain about the Apostle Paul. The gospel was everything to him. In his missionary journeys, he traveled thousands of miles, and was not afraid to pay any price if he thought it advantageous. In his old age then he could say, **As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.**

For us there has been a tendency to see Paul in first one way, then another. Many have seen him as a kind of spiritual father to churches that spread north and west from Palestine. And his epistles indicate that he thought of himself in that role, as he gave advice and counsel on how to live the Christian life. Moreover, in his epistles, it is apparent that he loves the people in these churches. And it is apparent that he expects that they love him. But it was not that long before the blinding light, that he was an intense persecutor of Christians. And I think we can surmise that pre and post blinding light, he must have been an accomplished writer and perhaps speaker. At times I have gone to a web site that has to do with the ancient city of Corinth. At this site one is able to see an image of the agora, the market place in the old city.

On either side are the ruins of ancient structures, public buildings for one purpose or another. And there are indications that there were spaces for shops on the agora side or the street side, of some of these buildings.

And so, while people came and went, buying fruit, vegetables, poultry, meat, and other foodstuffs, they might encounter someone like Paul, talking about the church. Talking about Jesus Christ. Talking about the blinding light. Talking about how he had been changed from persecutor to apostle. And so, around Paul, and especially in the synagogues, there was always the exchange of ideas and the sharing of experiences.

In regard to his use of controversial statements, there are some things that I wonder about. When he said something controversial, I wonder if he said such things as a provocative discussion starter. There is no way for us to know for sure, but consider this: When Paul said that women should be silent in the church, it is documented that many meeting places of churches were supplied by women of means, who had control of these properties, in one way or another. Perhaps Phoebe, the Deacon, was one of these.

And so I wonder if he uttered those words as a provocative challenge so a woman would say, "I will say what I want to when I want to." And I wonder what were the mitigating circumstances around Paul's other "unsettling words?" What about when he said men should have short hair and women long hair?

And those questions lead me to wonder about our 21st century role in regards to the apostle Paul. I wonder if we have studied him in too fragmented a way.

I wonder if we have embraced some of the more congenial words of Paul and ignored the unsettling words. I wonder if we would see Paul Number 1 say something, and Paul Number 2 say something else.

I am convinced in my own study that we need an appreciation of the whole man. We need an appreciation of all that he said, or wrote. That means that we must stretch our ability to appreciate to include those things that are not so pleasant to hear.

The implications of this spiritual and intellectual stretching of appreciation are striking.

Is it possible to love terrorists who want us dead because we are Americans?

Is our ability to appreciate the whole Paul linked to our ability to appreciate and respect an opinion or an approach that is in contrast to our own?

We live in fantastic and momentous times. Change in all areas of life is occurring at an unprecedented rate. I believe that our ability to appreciate the Apostle Paul in all of his facets is linked to our ability to appreciate a new diversity.

And if we are able to harbor the dynamic and unsettling presence of Paul, then we will be that much further along in accommodating the loving and challenging presence of Jesus Christ. And on the day of our Annual Meeting, as we look toward the future, that is not a bad place to be.

It may be that the challenge to stretch our appreciation of diversity, to stretch our appreciation of the Apostle Paul, may be all struggle and discomfort. But on the way I think we will get glimpses of a new and wonderful blinding light of our own. And we should look for that new light, that new love in our hearts, and in the hearts of others.

In regard to the blinding light, I am fond of quoting Thoreau in his essay on "Walking."
And I use it here.

".....We walked in so pure and bright a light, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such golden flood, without a ripple or murmur to it. And the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening.

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light. Amen.