

March 14, 2010
Romans 1:1-7
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Paul: A Letter

This is our last in a four-week sermon series on Paul. We have considered many aspects of Paul's story that will be included in the concert (Mendelssohn's *St. Paul*) this afternoon. I have spoken of the dramatic transformation of Paul's perspective regarding who is included in God's care and Paul's coming to the conviction that God shows no partiality.

Some of you may be shaking your heads. When we read Paul, even those letters scholars agree are from Paul directly, he certainly doesn't seem quite as open as I've portrayed him. In some respects you are right. Paul is no 21st century person. When we read his letters we sometimes cringe. For example, he continues to accept the institution of slavery (Philemon) and he refers to the husband as the head of his wife (I Corinthians 11:3). However, in his day and time, Paul was on the cutting edge.

At the same time, Paul as a person was not easy to live with. He's not the kind of person you might want to take with you for a quiet, lazy day of fishing. He was not the kind of person who it was easy to invite to a large family gathering. He was sure to preach. Paul was clearly a person on a mission and there was no shutting him up. He easily caused controversy and provoked opposition, not only from enemies, but also from fellow Christians. That's way he ended up in jail time and time again.

Those who are passionately committed to a cause often embarrass others who have similar convictions but want to go about it in a less confrontational way. Environmentalists, civil rights activists, animal rights supporters, and war protestors are all present day examples of groups who are often divided on what is the best way to get their message across. In reality, every group benefits from those who take the brunt of things at the front and those who keep planting seeds and working step by step for change. You may have noticed in the hymn *How Can I Keep from Singing*, which we just sang, the third verse was written in the 1950s recognizing those who were imprisoned during the McCarthy era for being at the front speaking out against injustice.

The Apostle Paul was this kind of person. He never chose the quiet, behind-the-scenes approach. It wasn't in him. You always knew where he stood, whether you wanted to or not. He stirred things up.

Imagine Paul in these days of email, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. He'd be everywhere. In his day, he tried. He traveled far and wide and wrote many letters to communities of Christians. In fact, all of Paul's writings that we have are in letter form. They were personal letters to individuals and churches, encouraging and instructing them in faith.

I decided to conclude this series with an imaginary letter from Paul to us. I have structured the letter using Paul's traditional style, and included in the letter some of the familiar passages from his undisputed letters: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. I have also included some personal names from our community, as Paul would have done.

LETTER TO THE BRUNSWICKIANS

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, to all God's beloved in midcoast Maine, to the church in Brunswick, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God and Christ Jesus.

I thank God for you and for your ministries. My visit with you was rewarding and word of your ongoing life together has reached me. I give thanks for your collection of warm coats for those in need, and of the various organizations to which you distributed them. Many of God's children will be warm – both outside and in – because of your care.

I also learned of the health kits your young people put together and of your monetary collection for the people of Haiti, over \$8,000. It is a blessing in many ways. In the face of such a devastating experience as this earthquake, people lose hope. They wonder if God is punishing them. They wonder if God cares. Your actions not only care for their physical needs but also give them hope. *For we know that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ. Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine...? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8:35-39)

I give thanks that you are a part of the body of Christ. *Indeed, you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it. And among you there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12)* To one there is the gift of teaching, to another healing, to another the gift of music, to another the gift of prayer, to another the gift of discernment, to another the gift of hospitality.

We are grateful for you many gifts and we rejoice with you in your recent celebration of baptisms, where you welcomed many children and one adult into the community of faith through the waters of baptism. This is such an important witness, for I understand that in Maine many people do not belong to a faith community. We give thanks that you witness to the good news and invite people into ministries of loving God and loving neighbor. I encourage you to share the good news that new life is possible, that new beginnings are real. *If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!* (II Cor. 5:17)

Does that mean that all of life's struggles disappear? Certainly not. In fact, what it means is that we are called to *bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* (Galatians 6:2) I am glad to see that you know this. I hear that in your concern for one another and the wider community you have been studying mental health issues. That is a term with which I am unfamiliar, however, it sounds like you are concerned about those who know the darkness of demons and torments of the body and soul. We know much about that. Things have not changed in that respect.

Such difficult matters, along with the ordinary tensions that come with life together in families and in congregations – decisions about priorities, financial commitments, personality conflicts, the proper way to serve communion and such – all these flare up from time to time. So remember....

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal....

Love is patient and kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude....

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. (I Cor. 13)

I also understand that this is a stressful time for your whole nation in terms of economic stress and the challenges of health care. In addition, the economic challenges for you have been exasperated by the closure of the military base. I've heard rumors that some believe the decision to close the base were political pay back against your senators, and they are looking for a way to retaliate. I do not know. But it is important to keep the faith. *See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.* (1 Thess. 5:15)

Hard times challenge us all, but there can be significant growth in such times if we hold fast to our convictions. I have learned this from my experiences in jail, as I have held firm to my faith. *Such suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.* (Romans 5:1-5)

Yet, some of our sufferings come from our own wrongdoings. We must turn from such wrongdoings and follow Christ. But thanks be to God we are ultimately made right with God not through our own actions, in following all the laws, but *we are justified by faith.* *The one who is truly righteous will live by faith.* (Romans 1:17)

If it was up to us, we could never accomplish it, much as our perfectionist inclinations would like to think we could straighten things out.

Yet in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

My journeys take me far and wide as I *press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 3:14)

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by more news of you. (Philippians 2:19) Until then please give my greetings to all members of your community.

In particular, Greet Ed & Jo Bradley who let me use their apartment while I was in your area. Greet Jane Primmer and Nancy Langbein and all the hospitality committee who provided food for my gatherings during my visit. Greet Rick Horton who came to visit me in the jail in Rockland, where I ended up after I left you. Greet Betsy Clough on her 90th birthday celebration.

I, Paul, write this last greeting with my own hand. (1 Corinthians 16:21)

Until we meet again...

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers.

(Romans 12:9-13)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit...(Philemon v. 3, 25)

The God of peace be with all of you. Amen (Rm. 15:33)