**Daily Devotions**

**May 2022**

*05-01*

“He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

— Acts 9:4-5

Main Idea: God’s work is dependent upon many people—some whose stories are well known and others whose stories are not.

Saul’s conversion was a community effort. There were a lot of events and people that needed to converge for Saul to be transformed into Paul. Saul’s role, of course, was to become one of the most hated and feared persecutors the early Christians ever faced. Jesus’ role was to scare the heck out of Paul, make himself known, and strike Paul blind, confused, and terrified.

There’s another who had a critical role in Saul’s conversion—Ananias was a faithful follower who was sent on a dangerous and terrifying mission. While Saul was fasting in shock in Damascus, the Lord sent Ananias to Saul to heal his sight. Ananias was petrified, but his faith gave him courage to go.

Saul’s conversion might not have had near the impact on the world if the community of faith had not accepted him. Would Paul have remained faithful to God if he had been ostracized for his earlier persecutions and left to fend for himself? Doubtful. Paul’s conversion is well known among Christians because his transformation is so radically dramatic. But Ananias’ demonstration of faith was no less transformational. The people who work behind the scenes are every bit as critical to God’s mission as the people whose stories are dramatic and renowned.

Consider how you might celebrate the people whose work is so rarely acknowledged. No one person is responsible for the spread of Christianity or for doing God’s work. It is the work of the community.

*05-02*

“All who heard him were amazed and said, ‘Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’”

— Acts 9:21

**“You’ve changed.”** Depending on the context and who said it, this can either be a terrible insult or a huge compliment. If it’s said by someone you used to be close to but have drifted away from, this can sting. It’s as if the rending of the relationship is placed squarely on your shoulders, when it’s likely both parties played a part. But if it’s said by someone that once disliked, distrusted, or feared you, this can be quite validating. It affirms your growth and acknowledges the hard work you undoubtedly put into being more than you once were.

Saul was most definitely hated and feared. But when Jesus took hold of his heart, he changed dramatically. When he preached about Jesus, it took hearers by surprise. Wasn’t this the man that once killed followers of Jesus? Yes, but he’s changed. I wonder how long it took for people to trust in the new man, Paul, after all he had put them through. I also wonder how powerfully his words of redemption and forgiveness hit home, coming from a person with his history.

After a major era of personal growth, it can be hard to be around people who knew you when. They often don’t want to know—or can’t see—the new you. It’s fruitless to waste time trying to convince others that you have changed. The best evidence is simply to be yourself. People who are incapable of letting go of the old version of you are no longer your problem. People with the ability to appreciate the new you will be blessed as they grow alongside you.

*05-03*

“When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.”

— Acts 9:26

**Saul had been through a major life transformation.** He’d gone from being the most feared and hated persecutor of Christians to one of Christianity’s most effective preachers and missionaries. Christians still feared him. Persecutors of Christians wanted to kill him. It must have been a lonely and frightening time, even as he cultivated his allies and trusted in the Lord. Still, his conviction outweighed his fear, and he persisted.

Whether positive or negative, going through a major life transition can be very lonely and frightening. Many who find themselves with life-altering medical diagnoses find themselves surrounded by fewer and fewer people as those on the fringes disappear—often they don’t want to be reminded of their own mortality, or they simply don’t know what to do or say. Others that have engaged a healing journey from past trauma or have strengthened their faith in a significant way find themselves isolated from people that are not ready to make transformative changes in their own lives. One gift is that as people drift away from you, the quality of your remaining and new relationships improves. When those who are not committed to knowing the new you drift away, you are left only with those that are willing to take the journey with you. Don’t spend any time pursuing the people that don’t want to be pursued. Revel in the relationships that bring you both joy.

*05-04*

“Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, ‘Tabitha, get up.’ Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.”

— Acts 9:41

**Jesus made clear before his resurrection and ascension that he would not leave his followers vulnerable.** He promised the Holy Spirit would walk with them and empower them. He assured them that they too, could do what Jesus did to change the world.

Peter believed him. When the opportunity arose for Peter to visit with a charitable woman whose good works were critical to the community, he didn’t hesitate. Like Jesus with Jairus’ daughter, Peter put everyone outside. Like Jesus, who spoke in Aramaic, “Talitha cum” (little girl, get up) (Mark 5:41), Peter spoke, “Tabitha, get up.” Like the little girl, the woman sat up. The story is written with such similarities to Jesus’ miraculous raising of the little girl intentionally. The rhythm of the tale and the sequence of events tell us that Peter was able to do what Jesus had done. Jesus’ work didn’t end when Jesus was raised and ascended. Jesus’ work was just beginning. Peter would take up the mantel. That mantel would be passed through generations. We too, have been given the authority to do what Jesus did. We have been called to preach, teach, heal, and love in Jesus’ name.

*05-05*

“The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’”

— Acts 10:15

**This text makes me sad and makes my heart sing at the same time.** It is a pivotal moment for Peter who was faced with a choice—continue to bring the people of Israel into the family of Christ, or open the doors for all people to engage fully in Christ’s salvation. To this point, Peter was open to having Gentiles hear and receive Jesus’ words, but they still were not welcome to participate fully with the Jews. Gentiles were still unclean, as they engaged in unclean activities regularly, like eating foods that were unclean.

God had other ideas. In a vision, God indicated that Peter was no longer to exclude Gentiles from participating fully in the things of Christ. Peter himself was directed to eat unclean food, and in doing so would either spoil himself or fully accept those unlike himself. Peter understood God’s words and from that point on, Peter taught and preached full inclusion of the Gentiles into the family of Christ.

What makes this bittersweet for me is that in 2022, people still find too many reasons to exclude those considered unclean. Others are excluded for their color, their poverty, their sexuality and gender identity, their age, and even their size. My heart hurts knowing there are still people content to object to others. But my heart warms knowing that God’s words have not changed, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” These are words worth fighting for.

*05-06*

“They answered, ‘Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.’ So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.”

— Acts 10:22-23

**Peter was still contemplating a vision that God had given him—he was directed to eat food Peter was raised to consider unclean.** While the vision still danced in his brain, visitors came to invite him to come speak with a Centurion—a Gentile, whom Peter would also have considered unclean and unworthy. It seems God knew just how to make an entrance. Peter’s vision was clear—God was directing him to commune with Gentiles.

Christians don’t often talk about being sign-seekers. Yet many in the Bible were moved by visions and signs. I cannot believe that God stopped sending visions and signs. Sometimes we may label them as intuition, but signs are still around us. Visions can still inspire us. Perhaps all it takes is for us to open our eyes and hearts to receive them.

*05-07*

“And he said to them, ‘You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.’”

— Acts 10:28

**Is it just me or is this exchange just a bit awkward?** For some reason, Peter found it necessary to point out to his host that he shouldn’t be there because the host and his family and friends are unclean. But, of course, God had given Peter permission and directed him not to consider people unclean. It sounds a little like a thinly veiled insult to me.

But Cornelius was not deterred. He shared with Peter his vision (wait—the Gentile had a vision from God, too?!). He humbly asked Peter to stay and to share the good news with them.

There are always opportunities, even today, for us to have a hard time knowing exactly what to say in situations that make us uncomfortable or that feel awkward. Especially now, when tensions around race, gender, and politics have bubbled to the surface, it can be easy to avoid having difficult conversations with people it is difficult to agree with or understand. But Peter’s willingness to commune with Gentiles, and Cornelius’ willingness to open his home to a Christian can be examples of how we might boldly face our fears and start those conversations, even when we don’t know what to say.

*05-08*

“But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities.”

— Acts 16:19

Main Idea: There is so much work to be done in God’s kingdom, we cannot hover where work is stifled—we must move on to where work thrives.

As a person involved with the addiction/recovery community, this story resonates deeply. Paul and Silas were doing God’s work in Philippi when they encountered a girl with a spirit of divination, which she used to make money for her owners. She annoyed Paul and Silas, so they cast out the spirit. Here you might think the girl or her masters might have been grateful that she had been cleansed of a spirit, but they certainly were not. They didn’t want her to be healed—she brought them a lot of money. Paul and Silas were thrown in jail for disrupting the peace and for failing to follow the laws of the community.

Often when people are suffering from addiction, they do not want to be healed. Addiction is an illness of the brain. It influences a person’s thoughts and behaviors so that nothing—not family, not work, not abiding by laws—gets in the way of using. Paul and Silas had the power of God on their side—we do not have that kind of power. We cannot heal another person of their addiction, no matter how much we might want to.

Paul’s and Silas’s response to their situation is incredibly apropos to the spirit of recovery. They didn’t allow themselves to get all wrapped up in the drama of the girl or her masters. They set their sights forward and they moved on. They converted the jailer who then freed them and offered them the hospitality they would never get from the girl or her masters. They worked with the people who were open to receiving their aid.

This is the hard part. Nobody can force another person to seek help for addiction. They can offer assistance, they can set healthy boundaries, and they can be there when the person decides to seek help. But they cannot do it for them. The best gift someone can give themselves if they are affected by a loved one’s addiction is to set their sights forward and move on. That is not to say they give up on the person—just that they disentangle themselves from the person’s illness and take care of themselves. Sometimes it means they must let go.

We live in a culture that is pretty good at encouraging codependence. But we are all healthier when we work toward interdependence—working together without becoming ensnared in each other’s drama. There’s much work to do in God’s world. We can set our sights on the people who are ready for assistance, and we can also ask others for help when we are ready.

For more information on addiction and recovery, check out http://www.aa.org/ and http://www.al-anon.org/.

05-09

“But Paul replied, ‘They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.’”

— Acts 16:37

Paul and Silas had been wrongfully accused of disturbing the peace after they cast a spirit out of a young girl that had been making money for her masters with fortune-telling. They were flogged and thrown into prison. When God opened the jail cell doors, giving them the opportunity to escape, they remained. They were not guilty of this crime, so they were not going to slink away. The jailer realized these men were innocent of the charge and asked to have them released.

When the magistrates realized they were not only innocent of the charges, but were also citizens of Rome, they were terrified. They arranged to have Paul and Silas released quietly. But Paul wasn’t having it. They had been accused, flogged, imprisoned in a very public forum. Paul insisted that they be treated with the respect they deserved. The magistrates relented, apologized, and sent them on their way.

This makes me wonder how often people in our community have been wrongly accused of a crime, beaten, and imprisoned. Then when they are absolved, they are invited to slink away without an equally public recognition of the apology. It is time we start to offer reparations for people and communities that have been treated abhorrently. Paul demanded no less. We can do better.

*05-10*

“[Peter said,] ‘Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’”

— Acts 15:10-11

For centuries God chose the people of Israel to be God’s people. All communication, conversations, writings, rites, rituals, laws, and customs were given to Jews.

When Jesus came, everything changed. Suddenly, it became clear that God had opened the invitation to everyone. This caused a great deal of confusion, as you can imagine. What now, were Jews to do about the vastly different rites, rituals, laws, and customs of Gentiles? Gentiles were not accustomed to eating clean, praying regularly, and were certainly not prepared to be circumcised—especially as adults.

So, the leaders of the church did what leaders of the church will do. They debated about it. Often. Passionately. Ultimately, Peter made the argument that the church stood by. It was not right to burden Gentiles with the “yoke” that even Jews could not bear.

To circumcise or not circumcise is not a conversation Christians have today. But we do still place a yoke on ourselves and on others. I invite you to reflect on this next sentence:

“Good Christians should…”

The thoughts that come up for you might just be a yoke you’re willing to place on yourself or others. If you’ve ventured this far, consider the next step—what would Christianity look like if those yokes were removed?

*05-11*

“[James said,] ‘Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.’”

— Acts 15:19-20

After a lengthy debate about whether or not new Gentile Christians should be circumcised, the church leaders came to a decision. Based on all they had heard, they would not require Gentiles to become circumcised. It may seem obvious to us now, as Christians today do not circumcise for religious reasons.

But let’s read a bit further. Although they agreed not to make circumcision a hallmark of Christianity, James still suggested that Gentiles be encouraged to “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.” It’s almost comical the way it’s written. Read: let’s encourage them to stay away from things polluted by idols. Oh, and to stay away from fornication. Also, stay away from anything that has been strangled. Yes, and while we’re at it, let’s discourage contact with blood, too.

It’s as if Jewish Christians were willing to let go of circumcision after a long debate on the topic, but they weren’t yet willing to let go of several other lesser problems from idolatry to contact with blood. (It doesn’t escape me that avoiding contact with blood meant that women menstruating were still considered unclean, but that’s a whole devotion of its own for another time.)

As time has passed, Christians have loosened their grip on these things James lifted up. But Christians still find ways to hold on to things they simply are not ready to give up. Consider what are the things you cannot abide? What would your faith and your community look like if you loosened your grip on those things?

*05-12*

“Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.”

— Acts 16:3

I don’t even know what to say about this. For the last several days we’ve been talking about a heated debate held by early Christians about whether Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised. The decision was no, Gentiles did not need to be circumcised to be considered full members of the church.

And then Paul found Timothy, a man whose mother was a Jewish Christian and whose father was Greek. Timothy had not yet been circumcised, and so Paul had Timothy circumcised “because of the Jews” they were planning to visit on their missionary journeys.

Again, I don’t even know what to say. It’s as if the decision made in theory went right out the window when it came to real-world practice. This seems like such an inconsistency. All I can think is that the early Christians were simply human beings trying to figure it out. Old habits die hard, and while Paul and his companions were happy to preach about not needing to circumcise, but they seemed to need to themselves be circumcised—just in case? I almost can imagine Paul recognizing that new Jewish hearers of the word would give them more credibility if circumcised, even if their words said otherwise, and they had to preach as if to “fake it ‘til they make it.”

What are some things you believe in theory but have a harder time putting into practice? How might you better align your words and your actions?

*05-13*

“They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them… During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”

— Acts 16:6-7, 9

We know from the New Testament that Paul and his companions visited more countries and communities than would seem possible. But we don’t often consider how many communities they did not visit. And for good reason. The Holy Spirit forbade them to speak in Asia. The Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to travel to Bithynia. But Paul received a vision telling him to go to Macedonia.

I used to envision Paul blowing through the countries like a hurricane. But today’s text suggests there were more nuances and more thought put into his journeys that that. And it wasn’t just thought Paul put into it—he was led by the Holy Spirit through roadblocks, obstacles, and visions.

We are often driven by the Holy Spirit, even though we might not recognize it as such. Many years ago I interviewed for a job I really wanted. The process was lengthy, and although they seemed quite interested, they dragged their feet and put off an offer. Finally, they offered me the job—the day after I accepted a job elsewhere. At the time I was pretty upset—it was a job I really wanted. Two years later, that same organization had a major internal fight and the organization split in two. It was costly and ugly, and had I been offered the job, I would have been smack dab in the middle of it. I see now that the Holy Spirit had put up a roadblock that prevented me from waiting it out and taking that job. Today I am grateful for the experience, especially since the job I took turned out to be a blessing to me and my family. Reflect on what obstacles or visions you’ve experienced that you may now see as the work of the Holy Spirit.

*05-14*

“A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”

— Acts 16:14

The story of the conversion of Lydia is one of the more notable stories of a woman whose role in the early church was critical to its success. I think sometimes we hold up this story as proof that women existed in antiquity. Look, it was a women—not only a woman, but a businesswoman—not only a businesswoman, but one who supported Paul and his companions on their journeys. See, there were important women in the Bible.

Unfortunately, I don’t think there were as few women with critical roles in early Christianity as we think—I believe these women were simply underreported and underappreciated. Scriptures were largely written by men for men—they were unmotivated to lift up the stories of women. The writer of Luke/Acts did better. Both books were more intentionally balanced than much of the rest of the Bible.

Despite the lack of representation, we can still do the hard work of envisioning an early Church (and a current church) where women were (and are) necessary for the Church to survive. Women still have a long way to go in the Church and in culture. (I think of a recent Facebook post by a female pastoral colleague that, when a man who said to her, “I don’t believe in women pastors,” she responded, “I’m literally standing right in front of you.”) All of us need to do better recognizing the contributions and importance of women in all arenas of community and culture.

*05-15*

“The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.”

— Acts 17:24-25

Main Idea: We can grow in our knowledge, understanding, and imagination concerning God when we learn about and learn from other cultures and religions.

Athens was a melting pot—a cultural metropolis for art, literature, and the debate of new ideas. It was an ideal place for Paul to spread the good news of the risen Christ. If he debated well, Christ’s story would reach listeners from all over the continent.

While there, Paul took notice of the culture all around him. He saw a statue to honor “an unknown god,” and he saw within it an opportunity to introduce Christ. He also quoted popular poets of the day, “In him we live and move and have our being,” to help listeners understand the nature of God. It was a wise move, and he converted many while he was there.

One of Paul’s greatest strengths was to meet people where they were, to speak their language, and to connect with people as he shared how Christ had changed him. He didn’t force himself upon people. He didn’t demand they change. He engaged them, listened to them, understood them, and then spoke.

One of the greatest strengths we can bring is to engage, listen to, and understand people where they are. Evangelism isn’t about force feeding people our truth. It is about sharing, interacting, and being witnesses to the miraculous and ordinary things God does in our lives every day. Listening and learning, even being willing to consider that we might be wrong and that we might have something to learn from others can be one of the greatest tools of evangelism we can call upon. Paul’s knowledge and understanding, and his imagination concerning God grew as he learned about Athenian culture.

Ours can too.

*05-16*

“One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent…They said, ‘This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law.’…Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things.”

— Acts 18:9, 13, 17

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Do you remember being taught this? It’s wholly false, of course. Words have incredible power to hurt us.

When Paul was preaching throughout several Gentile countries, it seems even he feared for his safety. God reassured him it was ok to speak, and so he remained in Corinth for a year and a half (that would have been quite a long time if he was going to be attacked for his words, don’t you think?). But the words did finally begin to catch up with him. Eventually, local Jews brought him to the local judge who refused to get involved in matters of words and interpretations of words. In response, the Jews went into the synagogue that had allowed Paul to preach, and beat the official of the synagogue in front of the tribunal where Gallio held his court. Still, Gallio refused to pay any attention.

Even today we are at war with words. Unfortunately, the words that seem to have the most influence are words that are untrue. And the words that hold the most truth are also the most feared. We are at a place and time right now where lots of people seem to be speaking, but few are listening. Maybe we can contribute to the weakening of this war of words by committing to listen, to empathize, and to compromise.

*05-17*

“He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.”

— Acts 19:8, 10

Paul aggressively and persistently preached about Jesus and baptized in Jesus’ name. Many who heard listened intently and had their whole houses baptized. Others who heard argued with Paul. When it became clear they were not to be persuaded, he moved on to preach, teach, and debate elsewhere. It took two years for Paul to preach throughout Asia.

We’ve become accustomed to immediate gratification. We can get nearly anything delivered to our doorsteps within a few days. We can have groceries delivered in fewer than two hours. Social media entertainment platforms have time limits for delivering their messages; TikTok’s longest posts are 3 minutes. And if it takes longer than 15 seconds to gain access to a streaming movie, we’re on the phone with the cable company asking what’s the delay.

We like things to happen fast. But sometimes the best things take the longest. Getting a new job can take months. Waiting for a baby takes 9 months. Healing from grief or trauma can take years. Coming to a place in life where you are comfortable in your own skin, don’t care what people think of you, and enjoy the little things can take decades. All these take time to cultivate, but are well worth the wait. What are you cultivating that is taking time?

*05-18*

“Then all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. While they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in an uproar.”

— Acts 21:30-31

When I was a child, I attended a few protests with my parents. Most specifically I remember marching in a protest against a plan to transport nuclear arms through the communities surrounding San Francisco. To prepare for the protest, we made sure to wear durable shoes, apply sunscreen, and pack snacks.

Earlier this month I came across an opportunity to join a protest for a more current issue. It was recommended that we prepare as such: wear a mask, wear goggles, cover up identifying tattoos, write the phone number for the national lawyers guild for our city on our arms (so we’ll have the number if we get arrested), change our phone to unlock with password only (because officers don’t need a warrant to unlock your phone with your finger), do not wear contact lenses (because they trap teargas), do not touch teargas canisters (because they burn), do not post pictures of ourselves or others at the event, do not post what we’re wearing to the protest, do not talk to the police without a lawyer present, and do not bring children.

It seems that sometimes standing up for what we believe can be incredibly dangerous. Paul knew it to be true. But not standing up for what we believe is also dangerous. It means giving our power away to people who do not have our best interests in mind. What do you believe that is worth the risk?

*05-19*

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today. I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison.”

— Acts 21:3-4

God knew what God was doing when God chose Paul to spread the word about Jesus. Paul was both Jewish and a Roman soldier. He spoke Greek and Hebrew. He had once been violently opposed to the people of “The Way” (Christians) but had been converted. He had a foot in many opposing camps, which gave him the perfect opportunity to bridge the gap between Jews and Gentiles as he preached the gospel throughout the countryside.

In this story, Paul was headed to prison for bringing a Gentile into the Jewish temple, defiling the temple. Paul was given the opportunity to speak to the people accusing him. In the next passage Paul will recount his conversion story to the crowd. But here, he uses his diverse background to connect with the listeners. Finding common ground can often be the beginning of opening up diverse conversations with diverse conversationalists. What is some identifying information about you that you can draw upon to open up conversations with people that are not the same?

*05-20*

“Now the son of Paul’s sister heard about the ambush; so he went and gained entrance to the barracks and told Paul.”

— Acts 23:16

Today’s story reads like a good spy novel. The tribune (like a defense counsel) was determined to protect Paul from the angry crowd until he could have a fair hearing for the crime of defiling the temple. (He had brought a Gentile into the Jewish temple.) Paul’s nephew heard that about 40 Jews had joined in a conspiracy to refrain from food or drink until Paul was dead. They planned to meet with Paul under the pretense of examining his case, and then they plotted to kill him. Paul’s nephew reported the plot to Paul, who then referred him to the tribune. The tribune told his nephew to do nothing until he could formulate a plan to save Paul.

Sometimes it’s easy to think of the hurricane that was Paul blowing through the countryside with his message about the gospel and overlook the many people he relied on to make it possible. Yes, we acknowledge that passively there were supporters who helped fund his journeys and gave him food and lodging when he traveled. Rarely do we get to hear of the intricate network of family and friends with eyes and ears everywhere, ready to pivot plans in a moment’s notice.

Some of us pride ourselves on autonomy. We feel more powerful if we can accomplish great things alone. We feel weak if we admit we need people for anything. If the great missionary Paul relied so heavily on the people around him for success, then perhaps we could learn something from him. What do you struggle to ask or receive help for?

*05-21*

“So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: ‘The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

“Go to this people and say,

You will indeed listen, but never understand,

and you will indeed look, but never perceive.”’ ”

— Acts 28:25-26

Rome was the center of everything. Since the Roman Empire had conquered so much, countries and communities for hundreds of miles were governed by magistrates and emperors of Rome. The city of Rome was a hub or diverse cultures, arts, entertainment, religions, and debate. It only made sense that Paul would venture to Rome to preach the gospel. He started, of course, by preaching to the Jews living in Rome, since Jesus was a Jew trying to shift Jewish thinking and behavior.

But many Jews in Rome weren’t interested in hearing what Paul had to say. It’s understandable that Jews living in Rome likely often heard speeches from people of other faith traditions trying to persuade them to believe and convert. Maybe Paul was just another of these pagans trying to lure them away from their faith.

And yet, Paul was a Jew and a citizen of Rome. His connection to Israel made his words more meaningful and more dangerous. Many of the Jews there weren’t having it. They turned their backs on Paul and some even plotted to have Paul killed.

But Paul fought back. He knew God had anticipated that at some point the Jews would be unwilling or unable to hear God’s words. Paul used their own words against them and shamed them for their stubbornness.

It can be hard to change, especially something as personal and meaningful as one’s faith, spirituality, or religion. While few of us are asked by God to make a change as big as the one Paul was asking, we are still sometimes resistant to new ideas that could shake our faith. What new idea has threatened to shake your faith, and what will you do with that idea?

*05-22*

“It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”

— Philippians 1:7

Main Idea: We can use our gifts to serve God no matter our circumstances.

Despite his imprisonment, not only did Paul continue to reach out to the Christian communities he had started, but he also found himself useful as a servant of God in the prison itself. The entire imperial guard learned of Paul’s mission, and his imprisonment and ongoing evangelism gave courage and strength to other Christians to speak their truth boldly.

God calls at inopportune times and often we respond with “when…” or “if…”. We say “I’ll follow God’s call when I have enough money,” or “when I have more experience,” or “more support.” “I’ll follow God’s call if God gives me a clearer sign,” or “if other people think it’s a good idea,” or “if I am likely to succeed.”

But our whens or ifs don’t matter. We can serve where we are. We can serve with the gifts we have. We can serve even if we don’t know if we will succeed or fail.

Imprisonment didn’t stop Paul from following God’s call. Some of us may not know our mission yet, but we can serve in many ways until we discover just how God intends to use our unique set of gifts for God’s glory. Others of us may know our mission but are reluctant to move forward because of obstacles. Still others of us know our mission and move forward boldly, whether we are likely to succeed or not. No one else can tell us what God’s call is for us. We must figure that out for ourselves, and then determine just how we are going to use our gifts to serve.

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“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.”

— Philippians 2:5-8

Main Idea: Christ invites us to emulate his selflessness in obeying God.

The Christ Hymn (2:6-11) exalts Christ for emptying himself. It is a juxtaposition of loftiness and lowliness blending into a lifestyle worth emulating. Christ took the form of a slave and bound himself to obedience to God, even when obeying God led to his death.

From a very human standpoint, this is martyrdom at its purest. He did not die for his own glory. He did not die for infamy or attention. He did not die to make a point. He died because his love for people asked no less of him.

Some of us have it inside us to die for those we love. Few of us have it inside us to die for those whom we don’t know. Yet this unadulterated selflessness is what Christ modeled—what Christ asks us to emulate.

It is not practical to place upon ourselves the expectation that we find a cause to die for. But we can look inside ourselves to discover that which we would consider dying for, and then work to fulfill that mission in whatever ways we are able. Everyone believes in something outside of themselves. Everyone has the capacity to empty themselves—if only for a short time—so that the love of Christ might fill them through the work Christ has set out for them to do. Christ extends the invitation to empty ourselves so that we might be filled as we serve and obey.

*05-30*

*05-31*