

Sermon Series "Acts" - Paul and the Corinthians  
Acts 18:1-23 / Acts 18:1-23 & I&II Corinthians  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
August 20, 2017 / Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

Last week, we left Paul leaving Athens after defending the Gospel message before the Greek Philosophers during his Second Missionary Journey, and we start with his arrival in Corinth.

Now Corinth is an important Greek city-state, because, as you can see from the little map, Corinth controls an isthmus that was a choke-point for East-West trade and for North-South land travel. If you wanted to safely transport goods between the Aegean Sea and Adriatic Sea; or you wanted to wage war in Greece, which most ancient Greek leaders wanted to do, you needed to go through Corinth.

This made Corinth rich and powerful. So much so was this a powerful area, that when the Romans came through, they completely destroyed and depopulated the area and they just left it desolate for 100 years, and when Julius Caesar re-founded it, in less than a hundred years when Paul came through, it had re-grown to become the Roman provincial capital for Greece, a major population center of Romans, Greeks, and Jews, it was massively wealthy, and the Sin City of the Ancient World.

Paul spent 18 months in Corinth, a much longer time compared to his stays in other European cities, and this was his first visit, and not his last. The Corinth Church does become a major center for Christianity and the recipient of Letters from Paul, two in the New Testament, two lost to time, and one rejected as fake by the Church Fathers. And both Luke's historical account and Paul's Letters together give us quite a look at Paul's time and relationship with Corinth.

So, chapter 18 begins with Paul arriving in Corinth and meeting a Jewish couple that were among those expelled from Rome, as decreed by Emperor Claudius. This gives us a historical marker. According to Roman historians, in 49AD, Claudius expelled 40,000 Jews from Rome because of their constant disturbances over the issue of Jesus Christ, but scholars doubt that this entire number left, only those participating in the disturbances. Priscilla and Aquila were among these; and this also suggested that there were Followers of the Way in both Corinth & Rome before Paul's arrival.

We also see some details of Paul's personal life, namely his profession as a tent-maker with the assumption that he was a member of the same trade guild as Aquila, and that he worked a trade to finance his life and mission. This, along with their shared faith, gives a context to Paul's relationship with the couple, and since they were in a major metropolis, it suggests that Paul spent more time laboring in the workshop than preaching in the market-place.

After working the week in the workshop, Paul joins Priscilla & Aquila on the Sabbath at the synagogue, and it is important to remember them, because they will pop up again and again in Acts and the Letters. Luke is very pithy about what happened in the synagogue, and its because we have seen it over and over again, so we do not need to hear it yet again. Luke assumes that we know what Paul does at this point.

Then Timothy and Silas rejoin Paul from their trip back among the Macedonian Churches. From what Luke describes, combined with a comment from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, they came with funds that allowed them to quit their day jobs and for Paul to focus solely on preaching.

As we have seen countless times before, Paul is rejected by some in the synagogue, and again, Paul shakes the dust from his clothes and leaves the synagogue. This act is reminiscent of Jesus' instructions to disciples in the Gospels, and more directly invokes the prophet Nehemiah, essentially making a gesture passing spiritual judgment on those who rejected the Good News.

And he also gave a verbal rebuke, invoking the prophet Ezekiel, which is something Quentin Tarantino does in ultraviolent movies to add dramatic effect. But Paul does not cut off all contact from them completely as we will see in a few verses, a couple officials of the synagogue were with him.

He then declared that he would go to the Gentiles, and the followers of the Way gathered next door to the synagogue at the home of Titius Justus, a Gentile believer. This is only the second house church that is named in Acts, the other was Lydia back in Philippi. Among those who attend the house church were both Jew & Gentile who had heard Paul in the synagogue, and there was Crispus, one of those synagogue officials.

With this shift from synagogue to house church, and the one hosted by Lydia does not count, because there wasn't a synagogue in Philippi to shift from, with this shift, it's importance must be understood in the context of James and his concerns back during the Council of Jerusalem. The decisions of that Council were made under the assumption that the mission would be solely synagogue-based, where the Jewish and Gentile believers would hear about Moses on the Sabbath, and would maintain both Jewish heritage and respect in the interpersonal relations with the Gentiles. So, there was a concern that the Christian faith would be gentilized if they separated like this. However, Luke makes sure that the listener knows that the house church is right next door to the synagogue and that there was still a relationship between the two groups. The faithful's Jewish heritage should not be in jeopardy.

Then Paul has a vision of Jesus, who tells him: “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not be silent, for I am with you and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.” It is both an assurance for Paul to hear from Jesus directly and it also anticipates what was about to happen next.

We know that the year was 52AD, and we know that because Roman proconsuls generally held their office in that province for only a year, and Gallio came from a famous Roman family, he was the older brother of Seneca, the famous statesman and writer that influenced the humanists and reformers a millenia later.

Anyway, Paul's opponents dragged him to the agora where the tribunal sat and heard court cases, passing judgments and making public pronouncements. Their accusations were very similar to the case brought against Stephen back in Jerusalem at the beginning of Acts. However, Paul is being charged with violating Roman law in Corinth, not Jewish law in Jerusalem. They do this because Judaism is legally recognized by the Romans, and they are saying that Paul was outside the legal boundaries of that protected status that Judaism had, by preaching that Jesus is the Messiah.

Gallio intervened before Paul could defend himself, rendering a legal verdict which sets the paradigm for all Roman verdicts that followed in Acts. Gallio stated that Paul had not committed a crime or serious villainy, and the Greek word translated as "crime" was *αδικημα*, denoting religious impurity, so Gallio is also proclaiming a theological innocence as well. He then stated that he lacked the jurisdiction in this case, that it was a Jewish matter and that they should see to it themselves. It was a question of words, names, and laws that were not his to judge.

Gallio's dismissal of this case later comes to symbolize Rome's heavy-handed neutrality toward Paul's Mission. It is like a political aloofness that Rome had in its benign rejection of the Gospel.

What happened next is rather bizarre. There is nothing from Luke that indicated the reason for the beating of Sosthenes, who did it, or which side he was on. Was he Crispus' replacement, who failed in his first act of his administration, and the failed litigants were expressing their frustration with him? Was he a recent convert and became the target of those anxious about Paul's Mission? What we do know, is that by two years later, Sosthenes was traveling with Paul and helped him write I Corinthians. The scene ended with Gallio's indifference, and Luke showing it, and therefore Rome, in a bad light.

Our selection and the Second Missionary Journey ends with an interlude that covers some traveling and sets us up for the Return to Ephesus and the Third Missionary Journey. The only thing of note, surprisingly is his haircut.

Mentions of a haircut is very important in the Bible. There is a type of person in the Bible called a Nazirite, and they are dedicated to service to God. They were consecrated to God as well, and they voluntarily vowed to follow a list of requirements and purity laws, for a preset period of time. Take Samson. He was a Nazirite, and he lost his holy power when Delilah cut his hair. It is also believed that both John the Baptist and Jesus were also Nazirites.

So Paul, getting a haircut, is either taking the vows to be a Nazirite, or was at the end of his time under the vows. Since he was on his way to Jerusalem, it suggests that he was about to take vows, but we don't really know, but why else would Luke even mention Paul getting a haircut?

What else can Paul's Letters add to our understanding of his time in Corinth and what the Corinthians were going through? To start with, the Corinth Church took up a lot of Paul's time and he was constantly worried about them. We know that Paul had written at least four letters to them, but we only have two. In I Corinthians, Paul refers to an earlier letter that he wrote to them; and in II Corinthians, Paul again refers to an earlier letter, and he described it as a "letter of tears." Some scholars think that an incomplete portion of it does exist tacked onto II Corinthians, because there is a sudden and drastic shift in the language, from harmonious to bitter reproach. And Paul described the contents of these lost letters enough that we know that we don't have them.

So, in short, I Corinthians is really the second letter, and II Corinthians is really the fourth letter, with maybe a bit of the third letter in it. And remember how there are a bunch of fake apocryphal books that were excluded from the Bible, there is a book called the Acts of Paul that includes a Letter from the Corinthians to Paul, and his response, called III Corinthians, but even in ancient times, they could tell they were all fakes.

In I Corinthians, Paul referenced all the named people that Luke has, and also

someone named Apollos, who we will meet next week in Ephesus. Luke references how Paul's situation was mired in conflict, and Paul referenced this in his Letters. The first conflict was over their rejection of his spiritual authority, to which he responded to by asserting his status as an apostle independently, as well as being an authorized Missionary endorsed by the Jerusalem Church. He spent two chapters in one letter and four chapters in the other defending himself.

The other conflict concerned certain immoral practices and food sacrificed to idols. What this shows is that a congregation that was founded by Jews and devout Gentiles had evolved in only four to five years into one that was largely pagan converts, without awareness of their debt to the church's Jewish heritage. This was exactly what James was so worried about.

And lastly, Paul contends that Christ is over all other concerns, and we must regulate every dimension of our human existence. Or put more simply, that we follow the Commandment to Love God and Neighbor in all that we do and with all that we can.

So looking at both Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Corinth and Paul's own Letters gives us a fuller view of what happened there. Paul faced conflict from within the community and from outside of it as well. But he never faltered. He stayed strong and completed his Mission. He listened to the words of Jesus, who hasn't appeared in person in Acts for many chapters, and His words brought comfort to Paul and fortified him, and is the best way to conclude, with His words.

Jesus said: Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you...

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, we seek to follow Your intentions and walk in your ways and to observe Your commandment to Love You and Love others. We endeavor to be strong, knowing that Jesus is with us and protecting us, and making sure that we will always be able to speak without fear. Amen

## INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

Loving God, We ask for the gift of Your Holy Spirit to help us pray as we ought, offering up to You our thanks and prayers for Your creation, its nations, and peoples, for your church, for ourselves and all in need.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for every comfort that we enjoy; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who have sacrificed of themselves for us.

We ask Your forgiveness, for sins known & unknown. We pray to You in our weakness, because we cannot go through life's troubles unscathed. We are stressed and strained, but we know that we can do better and be more aware of ourselves and of those around us.

We pray for all Your people who are in need. For energy and vision for those who are tiring in their battles against injustice and oppression; & for those exhausted by the struggle with poverty and hunger. We ask for hope and comfort for those whose lives are overshadowed by illness or pain; & for those whose lives are darkened by sorrow or bereavement and for the victims of terror. We ask for peace and joy for those living in the shadow of war and violence; & for those eaten up by guilt and anxiety. We ask for the guidance and strength of Your Spirit, for those uncertain how to use their time, talents and gifts; for those tempted to do what is wrong. We ask for love and courage for those reaching out to comfort the distressed.

Help us to see Your presence in the hearts of others; grant that we may all be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; give us the courage to respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We also pray for:

The Suddath Family      Deanna Muzzulin      Sue Kenny      Sean Larose

We offer these prayers in confidence and trust, as well as the prayers of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

## Psalm 146

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,

in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;

on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the Lord their God,

who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith for ever;

who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers;

he upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign for ever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord!

## Acts 18:1-23

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with

proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.' Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized. One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.' He stayed there for a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal. They said, 'This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law.' Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters.' And he dismissed them from the tribunal. 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.

After staying there for a considerable time, Paul said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had his hair cut, for he was under a vow. When they reached Ephesus, he left them there, but first he himself went into the synagogue and had a discussion with the Jews. When they asked him to stay longer, he declined; but on taking leave of them, he said, 'I will return to you, if God wills.' Then he set sail from Ephesus.

When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there he departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.