

Sermon Series "Acts" - Paul in Ephesus
Acts 18:24-19:10 / Acts 18:24-Acts 19:41
Colebrook Congregational Church
August 27, 2017 / Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

The portion of Acts for today takes place in Ephesus, but without Paul at first. We have a couple stories of misunderstood theology, a confrontation of magicians, and then a riot of silversmiths. And while this another example that Acts is more historical account than a preachable source, and beyond the unifying factor of it all happening in Ephesus, we can see the themes of the importance of theological education, the triumph of divine action over human magic, and don't instigate an illegal riot.

That last one reminded me of joke by Benjamin Franklin: "A rebellion is always legal in the first person, such as "our rebellion." It is only in the third person - "their rebellion" - that it becomes illegal."

We start with Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus while Paul is revisiting other churches in Asia Minor, beginning his Third Missionary Journey. This first story takes two people that we kinda know, and introduces us to a new person, while we learn about all three.

This story is like when you watch a Batman movie, when they take time out to introduce Robin. We all know who Batman is, where he comes from, and why he batmans; but who is Robin? Which Robin? Why is he Robin? Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos are like Robins to Paul's Batman; his sidekicks and this story tells us more about them.

What we learn about Apollos is that he was Jewish, from Alexandria, an eloquent speaker that was well-versed in the Scriptures, he had been instructed in the Way to some extent, he was enthusiastic, and a good teacher.

Now, Alexandria was the second most important city after Rome, being a major center for commerce and possessing a famous library, and it hosted one of the most important Jewish communities of the Diaspora. The Greek version of the Old Testament, the basis for all Christian Old Testaments until the Reformation, was translated there. That was the environment that Apollos grew up in. Also, the great Rabbi Philo was active during this time, so he may have been Apollos' teacher.

So, Priscilla & Aquila listened to Apollos in the synagogue and saw great potential in him, as well as someone who can help out Paul in Corinth. It is noted that while Apollos taught about Jesus accurately, he only knew the baptism of John the Baptist, which was a euphemism for “the Holy Spirit was not involved in the proceedings.” This reference, along with his description, suggested that Priscilla & Aquila only had issue with the lack of theology of the Holy Spirit, that his knowledge of Jesus was only from the beginning of His ministry.

So they took him aside and explained the Way more accurately, and in the Greek, they do some wordplay to make it obvious that the knowledge of Jesus was incomplete. And then, once they felt that he was ready, not Paul, but Priscilla & Aquila, decided to send him to Corinth to help out there. They sent a letter of introduction, and he was very effective in Corinth, and Paul spoke about his good work in his Letters.

Paul was not involved with this in any way, as confirmed by his Letters. This showed not only Paul's trust in the couple, but also the abilities that they had that led to this trust.

Paul later arrived in Ephesus and found some presumed Followers of the Way, but of the same sort as Apollos, having John's baptism, not that of the Spirit, and they apparently did not attend a synagogue, especially not the one that Priscilla and Aquila attended, based on their responses to Paul.

Paul at first presumed they were Christians. He discovered that their theological education was incomplete and they hadn't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. When Paul learned that they were followers of John the Baptist, he built from that foundation of what they did know, and led them to the Way. He accomplished this by starting where John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus as the Messiah that came after him. Then Paul baptized them after he completed their catechism.

And then Paul entered the synagogue and he followed the usual pattern. He preached for three months, and gained many followers and sparked the ire of others, then was kicked out, and they assembled at a new venue.

So Paul stayed in Ephesus for two years, writing at least four letters to the Corinthians, and performing miracles like healing the sick and exorcising evil spirits. And Luke makes sure to tell us that it was not Paul that really did this, but God, using Paul as God's instrument.

Now, Ephesus was a center of magical arts in the ancient world, and Luke is about to once again dive into the theme of miracles, which God does, versus magic, which magicians do.

This happens in a strange, but humorous story about seven sons of a Jewish High Priest named Sceva. To start with, there is no record of a high priest named Sceva in the historical record, and even if he was, what was he doing so far from Jerusalem? Then the number of sons, seven, is an important number, a divine number in fact. And well, these seven guys try to imitate Paul and conduct an exorcism, which was perfectly acceptable for them to do, but things did not go as expected.

Now Jesus did not mind people, even non-followers, invoking His name to exorcise demons; both Matthew and Luke record this in their Gospels. The bigger picture was saving people from demons, and it did not change His work for Salvation, so Jesus was cool with it.

But here's what those seven guys did wrong...they imitated Paul instead of Jesus. They invoked, "Jesus whom Paul proclaims."

The evil spirit responded by saying, “Jesus, I know, and Paul, I know; but who are you?”

The evil spirit then possessed the seven sons, injured them in some unspecified way, and then forced them to run naked through the city.

The residents of Ephesus were awestruck, they literally “felt fear” in the original Greek, which helps in our understanding of their reaction, which was a massive book burning of all the magical books, symbolizing their casting aside of their paganism, and their acceptance of God.

Okay, so this led to a spiritual renewal in Ephesus. There is an odd phrase that is used here that is rare in Scripture, that “believers” rather than “sinners” repented, suggesting that some converts had continued some of their previous pagan practices. Remember once again, James' concern about the pagans back at the Council of Jerusalem.

Then Paul outlined his plans for the rest of his Third Missionary Journey. He'll head off to Macedonia, then Achaia, then back to Jerusalem, and then on to Rome. That Paul is thinking like this means that he feels that the Ephesian Church has matured enough that he can leave them.

Though, before he could leave, there was a riot. Apparently, Paul's mission in Ephesus has been so successful that the city merchants claimed that it had an adverse effect upon their business. Paul has turned people away from the “traditional” religion and towards the Way, so he was bad for business.

A man named Demetrius brought together his silversmith guild and other artisans and gave a speech to inflame their hearts. He appealed to them to see the threat that Paul and the Way represented to their livelihoods, with their rejection of idols and graven images. He then invoked the reputation of their great Temple of Artemis.

And then the riot was on. The city was full of confusion, and they at least filled the theater, which held 24,000, but there were probably still roving mobs. It also seemed that some were not distinguishing between Jewish and Followers of the Way, as both follow the Commandment against idols and graven images. Then the mob grabbed a couple of Macedonian Followers as if they were named John & Ringo, because they couldn't find Paul.

Paul was concerned for the Followers, but was prevented from intervening with the crowd by his companions and even provincial officials.

There was still much confusion and chaos throughout the city. A representative of the Jewish populace tried to speak to the mob, but when they saw that he was Jewish, they shouted over him for two hours, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

Only when the city clerk waded into the fray did the crowd quiet down, and then he read them riot act and sent them all home.

I shared this story with Debi McKeon earlier this week and she had a laugh. Can you imagine a riot out here in Colebrook, and the only thing that could stop it was Colebrook Town Clerk Debi McKeon coming out and yelling at everyone to knock it off and go home?

Anyway, the Ephesian City Clerk declared that Paul hadn't done anything against the Temple; that the mob had acted illegally in grabbing John & Ringo; and they weren't a proper assembly and didn't have any jurisdiction...so they should stop making a commotion and go home!

Paul loved Ephesus. He spent the most amount of his total time of there, and other reasons that are spoilers. And a lot happened there, and we can take three lessons from this time there

First, are protests a bad thing? This story suggests that there are proper and improper reasons for acts of protest or other forms of mass demonstration; and it is determined by what they are demonstrating for or against. Take the actions of Gandhi, seeking the right of self-determination for his country, and I would say that was proper. There was the Civil Rights movement here in our own country, seeking equality in an imbalanced system, and that was proper. So, don't start a riot without a good reason.

Second, to a casual observer, there were many similarities between the actions of a magician and the actions of a prophet, and that caused confusion. They both made similar claims, predicted the future, and influenced people. The real difference between them, according to Luke, is that one is detached from a personal relationship with Jesus and is motivated by self-interest, which is why it doesn't work.

Lastly, is the importance of a complete Christian Education. A full and proper understanding of theology can only help in spiritual formation and faith exploration. No matter what gifts one has, if they do not have a full understanding, there is something missing.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, we thank you for the work of Your servants, be they Apostles or their companions. May we follow their example, seeking a fuller understanding of You and Your Word, and trusting in Your Spirit to move us where and how You will. 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 put themselves between us and harm, and for those who have helped us in our times of need.

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 who struggle with poverty and hunger. We ask for hope and comfort for those overwhelmed by pain in mind, body, or spirit; & 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 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,

Selah

that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.

Selah

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.

May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Acts 18:24-19:10

Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—altogether there were about twelve of them.

He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.

[Sermon covered Acts 18:24-19:41]

[<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=370806242>]