

January 7, 2018

TEXT: Acts 19:1–10

TITLE: A Persistent Gift

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

If someone asked us “What’s in the Bible?”, we would say that it has stories about creation, about Jewish prophets and kings, about John the Baptist and Jesus and how the first disciples formed the church long ago. We think we have a pretty good idea of what is in the Bible. But when you read the Bible, really read it closely, it is amazing how much more is there than you might think or imagine.

In Acts 18, we learn about the end of Paul’s second missionary journey, as he traveled around the coast of the eastern Mediterranean region telling about Jesus Christ. In Corinth he met a husband-wife team of Aquila and Priscilla, who became converts and traveled with Paul, first in Greece and then to the city of Ephesus in what is now western Turkey. Eventually Paul went back to Jerusalem and started his third missionary journey. But while Priscilla and Aquila were there in Ephesus, a Jewish man from North Africa and a follower of John the Baptist made his way to Ephesus—and began preaching about this new faith in Jesus Christ. His name was Apollos; and even though he was a great preacher, his theology wasn’t perfect. Priscilla and Aquila heard him speak and pulled him aside to build on what he knew about John the Baptist and tell him more about the full gospel of Jesus Christ. Apollos listened and learned from them, and in time he continued on west to Greece just as Paul was making his way from the east to re-visit his friends in Ephesus. That’s where today’s passage from Acts 19 begins.

Why is it helpful to know this background? So often we look at the church today with all these competing Christian denominations—Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans, Pentecostals—and wish that things were like they were back in the early church. We wish everyone could just get along and that there would only be one church—the church of Jesus Christ. But the truth is that there was never just one church. From the moment Jesus called twelve disciples and they carried the gospel into the world, the church has looked differently and at times acted differently in every place where it was established. Some had close ties to the synagogues; others had been kicked out from that community. Some met in large homes and places of wealth; others gathered in the shadows or under trees by the rivers. Sometimes people like Apollos came to town, preaching and converting—but they needed teachers like Priscilla and Aquila to correct incomplete or inaccurate theologies.

Interestingly, there are still followers of John the Baptist meeting by riversides even today. There are about 50,000 of them and they are called Mandaeans. They are mostly found in southern Iraq. They don’t cut their hair, abstain from meat and alcohol, and shape their lives around regular baptisms in river water for purification and renewal. In some ways, they are like modern day Apollos to our Presbyterian church of the apostle Paul.

I mention all this to reinforce why it is important to study the bible and know what it really says. You have heard it said that the bible talks about the church as if early Christians were a unified group, of one mind and one theology; but I would say to you that we have always been divided into groups and denominations—and that it is precisely this interplay between diverse believers that is our strength and has kept us vibrant in the world for so many centuries. Think about it this way: Philosophy didn't start with the ancient Greeks because they were more wise and inward-looking than everyone else, but largely because they were a trading people who sailed and encountered different cultures that challenged their own world-views and beliefs. It is by meeting with, talking and debating and learning from strangers that history moves forward and innovation occurs that changes human life.¹ Paul met Priscilla and Aquila and their world changed, who in turn met Apollos and expanded his faith and witness, followed by Paul staying in Ephesus to further correct Apollo's teachings and create a strong congregation in that city able to nurture new churches throughout the whole region. From diversity, not uniformity, comes strength to serve Christ in the world.

Now the specific issue Paul addressed in Ephesus was the sacrament of baptism. Was it an act of repentance à la John the Baptist or an act of grace and empowerment à la Jesus Christ? The book of Acts opens with the story of Pentecost and the spirit descending on the 12 disciples, sending them out to speak about Christ in foreign languages to all the people gathered in Jerusalem. So it is no surprise that in Acts 19 this group of 12 church members in Ephesus should also be baptized and received the Holy Spirit to speak in tongues and prophesy—literally to find the words to speak truth to power in their own community about the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is one of those things that divides Christians. Do you believe in infant baptism? Or should we wait until people are old enough to make a conscious profession of faith and therefore only do adult baptisms? Is baptism with water enough or must baptism be linked with a Pentecostal gift of tongues? It's frustrating when believers fight over these questions. It is like children playing in a swimming pool, splashing one another in the face so that no one can see clearly. Baptism "water fights" only lead to blurred vision. You have heard it said that baptism must be done in a particular way to people of a particular age, but I would say to you that the amount of water and age of the recipient are not critical. Baptism is a visible act of invisible grace. It is a sign pointing to God and a seal marking us as children of God's love and Christ's adoption. It bears fruits according to the leading of the Holy Spirit—not to set us apart from or place us over others, but to push us into the thick of things where work needs to be done, where justice must be proclaimed, and where the wounded cry out for help. Once again, from these varied understandings of baptism and diverse experiences comes the strength we need to serve Christ in the world.

At the end of today's passage comes an interesting detail. We're told that when Paul returned to Ephesus, he taught in the synagogue, where some heard and some did not. He then went to the lecture hall and spoke about Christ and about this movement called "the Way"—this new way of life uniting people across race and gender and class in a fellowship of Christian love. The passage notes that Paul stayed there for two years so

that many, many people could hear the word of the Lord. In truth, it was one of the longest stays in his missionary career and the last place he lived for any significant length of time before eventually being taken to Rome, tried as a troublemaker and revolutionary, and put to death during the time of Emperor Nero.

You have heard it said that hearing the good news of Christ leads to dramatic conversions that immediately begin to bear fruit and set people on new paths of faith; yet I would say to you that while conversions can be dramatic and quickly bear fruit, the life of faith is one of persistence. Faith involves walking as people of “the Way” day after day after day, getting up after being knocked down, seeing each sunrise as a fresh opportunity to love, forgive, speak out, and live as an active follower of Christ. The narcissist will say “We don’t have much time so I’ll just tell you about me.” The person of faith says, “Let me hear your story. I’ve got time because you matter. God knows what good we might be able to do together.”

The apostle Paul stayed in Ephesus for two years. He made tents to support himself as he talked, listened and put down roots in people and in places so that the seeds of faith might grow and flourish. Good work takes time. And Christian faith, love and justice are very good work and worth all the time in the world.

Now, if you are observant, you noticed that I titled this sermon “A Persistent Gift.” What is the gift in all that I’ve said? Through a close reading of the first 10 verses of Acts 19, we see three gifts. There is a real gift from living as a diverse group of people—in this church, in this nation and in our world. Contrary to those voices that speak about “us vs. them” and would isolate us politically from others, we are best when we are together—diverse racially, economically, in terms of nationality, gender identity, even religious affiliation and denominations. It keeps us from “sins of self” and opens us to a learning and evolving into a healthy and diverse faith.

Second, there is a gift in every baptism—not so much in how or when it happens, but rather that it still happens, that we seek to wash away sins, that we desire to start anew, that we are vulnerable enough to let the Holy Spirit fill us—send us out to speak truth to power, not for our sake but for the sake of Christ, his truth, his justice, his love. And third, there is a gift in being a persistent people—folks who put down roots, who don’t give up, who don’t chase after the next new thing but spend time together so that seeds can be planted that in the future will lead to harvests of righteousness.

I’ll close with one of my favorite quotes. It comes from Reinhold Niebuhr and it goes like this: “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. And no virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint; therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.” (from The Irony of History) May these gifts of faith—hope—love—and forgiveness be real to you this day and may it truly be a persistent gift.

AMEN

¹ Cf. Sarah Bakewell, At the Existentialist Café, pp. 131-2; and Thomas Friedman, Thank You for Being Late, pp. 247-8.