

**SERMON: July 17, 2022 - 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore – Rev. Greg Wooley**

*(initially preached at Greg's first Sunday at Ralph Connor, ten years ago on July 8, 2012 – with updates in [ ] )*

As you may have heard, [from 2000 to 2012] I worked in a school in Calgary. One day [around 2002] a young boy – grade 2 or 3 at best – was summoned to the office first thing in the day. Never a good sign. He had to meet with my office compatriot, Richard, who handled most of the student discipline issues.

So, Richard asked him, “do you know why you’re here?”

The boy nodded and said, “yup, it’s cuz I stole a pencil case from a boy in my class”.

“No, that’s not it”, prompted Richard, “anything else come to mind”?

Looking down at his feet, the boy nodded again. “Well, I pulled my sister’s hair really hard at recess.”

Well no, that wasn’t it either, so Richard gave him another chance. The boy offered up seven or eight more things, any one of which would have landed him in the office if they had seen the light of day before now. Finally, Richard intervened. “How about something that happened on the bus on the way to school this morning?”

“Oh, THAT” said the boy, wincing, grimacing, and avoiding eye contact.

I’m not big on titling sermons, but today’s would be entitled, “Paul has a problem.” Identifying Paul’s biggest problem is about as easy as trying to tease out what had landed that kid in the hot seat in the school office, because the gentleman we know as the Apostle Paul or Saint Paul was a very complex man with a number of issues that repeatedly landed him in conflict.

So, Paul, we might ask, what brings you to the office today?

Is it his phenomenal ability to gain enemies? There’s no doubt that he would have come across as a know-it-all, but he lived in a time and place where blunt, direct leadership was needed to ensure that the Church would survive its early years. No, that’s not the big problem I have in mind.

Is it the fact that quite a few of Paul’s writings seems to be really sexist? Well no, it’s not that – though some Sunday I suspect we’ll delve into this topic. There’s some recent scholarship to suggest that while Paul may not be up to 21<sup>st</sup> century expectations, he was a man well ahead of his time and culture when it came to the treatment of women, slaves, [LGBTQ folks], and other marginalized persons. One author, Sarah Ruden, goes so far as to say that in his navigating questions around sexuality, Paul shows an “ingenious combination of common sense and radical defiance for dealing with a very tough set of issues.” (Ruden, p.87) So no, it’s not that.

Was it the financial question? Paul’s opponents were happy to raise suspicions about how Paul funded his church planting mission all around the Mediterranean, wondering aloud if he was skimming from the offering that was supposed to be sent to Jerusalem. Paul defends himself on this point, underlining the fact that he was a tentmaker by trade, and that trade came with him everywhere he went. In a bizarre twist of logic, his opponents used that against him, claiming that if he were a REAL prophet he’d be happy to take a legitimate salary for this Church-planting work, rather than raising money from more questionable

means While these financial questions dogged him, they aren't the big problem I'm thinking of today.

Is it the fact that in his earlier years, when he was still known as Saul, Paul was a vigorous persecutor of Christians? While some of his contemporaries were impressed by his thorough conversion, I hunch that just as many would be turned off by it: the Pharisees who used to hunt down Christians alongside him would certainly view him as a turncoat, and anxious Christians who used to hide from him would have their suspicions about his sincerity now. That's definitely a problem, but not THE BIG problem for this day.

Could it be that Paul had a maddening, debilitating physical ailment? Could THAT be the problem? Well, we're getting warmer. Paul did address that in the reading we heard this morning from 2Corinthians. For years, my inner 13-year-old has enjoyed knocking around the most embarrassing possibilities of what threatened to derail Paul's mission: did he have really bad gas? Was there something in his manner of speech that was easy to mock? [Was his gait] directly out of the Monty Python "Ministry of Silly Walks?" Paul is pretty cagey when it comes to telling us exactly what it was, but the common English translation "a thorn in the flesh" doesn't really express its full intensity.

A couple of theologians who I hear are familiar to you, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, take a stab at the question by suggesting that Paul suffered from a form of chronic, recurring malaria which would have incapacitated him with blinding headaches, intense nausea and bone-shaking spasms. (Borg, Crossan, pp. 63-64) Apparently, malaria was not uncommon around Paul's home town of Tarsus, and if he was unfortunate enough to carry it around with him, it would have been enough to challenge his will to live, let alone his ability to carry out such a broad ranging ministry.

There is great significance to Paul's infirmity. Throughout much of his writing to the Corinthians, Paul contrasts human boastfulness with true, divine wisdom and power, and one of the ways he has learned to deal with his own physical struggles, is to view it as a rather brutal reminder that God, not he, is the one with the final say. But even with this in mind, I think that this major physical problem, while big, points to Paul's BIGGEST problem.

As I was preparing for this first Sunday of continuous ministry with you, I kept coming back to the other part of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12 as something that all of us need to take note of. Paul's biggest problem, as I see it, was that he'd had this amazing direct experience of Jesus, and from then on was pestered by the need to share that experience. Paul had an ecstatic religious experience, and while he doesn't want to brag about it, he's got to do something with it.

We know, from the book of Acts, that Paul had a knock-me-down experience on the road to Damascus, where the risen Christ confronted him and converted him. Whether he's referring to that same experience here is unclear. But what is clear is that he's still shaken by it, fourteen years later. In the tradition of the prophets of old, who spoke of their experiences of God's Holy presence, Paul had one of those deep, soul-altering experiences of God. And that makes that wretched malaria, or whatever it was, that much more frustrating, because not only does he have the burden of this message from God; he also has [a physical] affliction that makes it nearly impossible for him to deliver the message in a continuous and predictable manner.

Paul, in fact, confronted Jesus with this two-pronged problem. He prayed repeatedly to have the affliction taken away from him so that he could be more fully present to spreading

the word, and got this reply: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.” Or in the words of the hymn-writer [unnamed; see Voices United #660], “when through fiery trials your pathway shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply.” It appears that for Paul, there is a necessary interrelationship between the powerful message of Christ, which Paul is burdened to deliver, and his physical affliction, which reminds him time and again that it is Christ’s power, not his own power, that drives the message.

On this first Sunday of what I hope will be many Sundays with you, I want Paul’s deep agitation to tell the world of his direct experience of Jesus, to plant a seed in us: I want it to plant a seed in our hearts as individuals, in our spirit as a congregation, in our relationships with those closest to us. I want us to identify the Divine moments in our lives, and let those moments change us.

I am convinced that even if we’ve not had any kind of mystical, ethereal encounter with the divine, everyone has had times when the presence of God has been tangible, and personal, and has presented you with a new way of thinking, doing or being. It could have been in an unexpected kindness from a stranger, or a time when you reached beyond your usual limits to include or support someone... and you knew, in the moment, or shortly thereafter, that the Holy One had been specially and specifically in that moment. It could have been a devastating experience, a loss or a tragedy, or perhaps a moment of profound beauty [experienced in these glorious mountains], that shifted your foundation from self-reliance to reliance on God. It could have been an ordinary moment in the midst of a normal workday, when Christ opened your eyes to the wider implications of your actions on your community and your world. Or maybe you have had an intensely personal, mystical experience of the Lord and are struggling to bring that indescribable moment into the mundane realities of daily living. Whatever it looks like in your life, I am convinced that we HAVE encountered the risen Christ, and need to let that encounter “be a problem” to us, which prods and goads us into life-giving beliefs, deeper connectedness with the moment, radical forms of welcome, and meaningful acts of service.

That’s not a problem to be relegated to one sermon on one Sunday morning. It’s a daily challenge for every Christ-follower, and a topic I hope will infuse our conversations in our time together here at Ralph Connor Memorial United Church. Friends, in the context of that challenge, may I say: it is good to be here, with God, with you. [May there be many more Sundays for us, together!] Amen.

Works cited:

Borg, Marcus J. and Crossan, John Dominic. *The First Paul*. NYC: HarperOne, 2009.

Ruden, Sarah. *Paul Among the People*. NYC: Pantheon, 2010.

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