

“Travel – on Purpose”

1 Corinthians 16:5-9
Deuteronomy 8:1-3

First Presbyterian Church
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Jeffery L. Sheler in his article “Reassessing an Apostle: The quest for the historical St. Paul...”¹ writes this:

He never walked with Jesus of Nazareth, yet he traversed the Roman Empire proclaiming him the divine Christ. He never heard Jesus teach, yet he became Christianity’s most influential expositor of doctrine. He spoke little about Jesus’ life, yet he attached cosmic significance to his death and resurrection.

The Apostle Paul, some scholars now believe, was more instrumental in the founding of Christianity than anyone else, even Jesus himself.” Whether or not you believe Paul was more instrumental than Jesus – and I do not believe that, since Jesus is the definition of instrumental when it comes to Christianity – but no matter what anyone says or believes, it is clear that Paul did more to bring people to Christ than any other person on earth.

Thanks to Paul’s calling as the apostle to the Gentiles, Christianity spread throughout the world, altering the course of history. How is it that Paul was so successful at living into his calling – our shared calling – to make disciples of all nations, all people? That’s what we’ll look at today, and what his success and travels can teach us about our calling.

Today we have the second in a series of sermons titled “On-Purpose” – “Church – On Purpose” last week, “Travel – On Purpose” today, “Talk – on Purpose” next week, and “Live – on Purpose” July 12, as we finish out the series.

Paul was so successful in building up the church through his travels, his speech and his life because Paul was focused on a divine purpose. For Paul, each of these aspects of life – his travel, his speech and his life’s contribution – were all focused on building up the Church.

Let’s take his travels, for example. And specifically, let’s look at his travels to around Macedonia. In today’s New Testament lesson, Paul says to the Christians in Corinth, “I will visit you after passing through Macedonia – for I intended to pass through Macedonia ...” Corinth is in south-central Greece. And while Paul had to pass through Macedonia to get there, he wasn’t planning to spend time in Macedonia – until God planted the idea with him.

¹ Jeffery L. Sheler, “Reassessing an Apostle: The quest for the historical St. Paul yields some surprising new theories,” U.S. News & World Report, April 5, 1999.

We know from the Book of Acts (16:9) that Paul was in the Roman city of Troas when the Holy Spirit prevented him preaching there. While trying to discern what he should do next, Paul had a dream that a man from Macedonia was begging him to come there and help them. And with that, Paul knew that, despite his plans to visit with the Corinthians, God wanted him to take the time and the effort to first, stop and tell the Macedonian's about Christ (Acts 16:10-11), and so he did. Looking at Paul, we can learn a lot about how best to approach our travels – our movements – through this world, and our calling to tell others about Jesus.

First, Paul was clear about his plans, and then God had other plans. How many times has that happened to you? We can all relate to that, can't we – the old saying, "People plan and God laughs?" And that's just what happened to Paul. Paul writes to the Corinthians about his travel plans to visit them, saying, "I will visit you after passing through Macedonia...." And because Paul followed God's leading by stopping in Macedonia, he was able to plant three churches in that region – one at Philippi (Acts 16:12-40), one at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9), and one in Berea (Acts 17:10-14).

Had Paul not been open to changing his plans by the leading of the Holy Spirit, the people of these cities might never have come to love and follow Christ. Well folks, there is no reason any of us here can't be just as effect as Paul in telling people about Jesus. We just need to be flexible enough to go where the Spirit leads us, and to trust that God will get us where we're supposed to be.

It's like the elderly gentleman who was brought home one evening in the back of a police car, clearly not what he had planned. Seeing this, his wife was shocked and didn't know what to make of it. But the policeman politely told her that her husband had been walking in the park and couldn't find his way home.

"Oh, Morris," said the wife. "You've been going to that park for more than 30 years! How could you get lost?" Leaning close to her so the policeman couldn't hear, Morris whispered, "I wasn't lost. I was just too tired to walk home."

Sometimes in our travels, we feel too tired or too busy or too afraid to go where God would lead us, and that's particularly true when it comes to sharing the gospel, telling people about Jesus. But what Paul shows us is it's not about us. It's about the people we meet along the way, people who need Jesus in their lives.

We see this openness to the Spirit's leading when Paul tells the Corinthians, "... I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits." Paul is clear about his desire to be with them, but he's even more clear that the Lord may have others who need him more. It's hard, isn't it, to put our busy rush, rush schedules on hold when someone comes along asking for our time and attention?

And yet, Paul is determined to go where the Lord calls him and spend whatever time is needed. “I will stay in Ephesus...,” says Paul, even though he was hoping to be with the Corinthians. “I will stay in Ephesus, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me,” and there are many adversaries.”

When Paul says a “wide door” has opened to him, he means that people there are receptive to hearing about Jesus. When he says “there are many adversaries,” Paul means that are other people there who are not too receptive at all when it comes to Jesus. Interestingly, that’s just how Paul measures his effectiveness, his calling to tell people about Jesus.

Paul knows that some people will be drawn to Christ, and he knows that others won’t. He know that if he is being true to the nature of Christianity – the self-sacrifice and Christlike love that it requires – there will be people who would rather take the easy way out, people not willing to embrace the hard work of following Jesus, of sharing about Jesus with others. And God knows this, too. That’s why God called you to be a follower of Christ, so that you might shine light for those who are looking for Jesus, and be a witness for those who have turned away from him.

Scripture tells us that before we were born, God knew us. God knew that some of us would rebel against his love and mercy, and God knew that others would be drawn to him instantly, never to turn away. Our calling is to tell about and reflect the nature and wonder of Jesus, no matter who is standing before us – a lost saint or a rebellious sinner.

The purpose of our travels – of our movement through this world as followers of Christ – is to shed light where there is darkness. It’s that simple. And it’s that hard. You can tell when the light of Christ has dimmed in someone’s heart, in someone’s soul. And you know how hard it is in that moment to shine divine light into that situation.

The places we need to go, the time we need to take, the flexibility we need develop and maintain to be in the right place at the right time, well, it’s just unimaginable. We never know when God is going to call us to be that witness, that light for another human being. And yet, that is the purpose of our presence in this world, wherever we find ourselves.

So, let us take a page from Paul’s travelogue and 1) stay focused on our calling; 2) be flexible and go where we’re needed, where God would lead us; and 3) be brave – be faithful – in telling others about the kingdom, and the power and the glory of Jesus. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

To begin our prayer time, we have a prayer from Thomas Merton,¹ the Trappist monk and writer, because of what it says about our travels through life, the theme of our June 28 sermon:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing."

It is our desire, O Lord, to please you, and so we turn to you in prayer knowing that hearing from your beloved children is the most pleasing thing for you, in all the universe.

We pray for your guidance and strength in all we do. We pray for your Spirit of healing, health and wholeness for those in need, and particularly for those we continue to lift up in prayer these recent weeks.

We pray, too, our thanksgivings for your love for us. We are thankful for the birth of Thomas Bryan, born to Bonnie and Will Ratcliff last week.

We lift all of this up in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom you sent to journey alongside us always, in body and in Spirit – Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**