

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

A Profile of Pastor Paul 3 – Testifying to the Kingdom of God

Jan 18, 2015

**Ps 62:5-12 & Acts 28:11-30 – Text = Acts 28:23-24
(13, 625, 461, 775)**

Beginning with the first Sunday in February,
we're going to change the format of worship, learning, and fellowship
here at Brentwood a little bit.

We'll gather at 10AM on Friday morning
and go through until 10PM on Sunday night.
Yes, three full days of learning about, arguing about,
and figuring out what God is up to in the world.
It will be intense, immersive, and life-changing – every weekend.
I'm convinced that's going to pack them in
here at Brentwood.

Why the uneasy chuckles?
Why the shocked expressions on your faces?
Why the frowns and shakes of your heads?
Don't you think that's a great idea
for getting more people involved
in being the church in Jesus Christ?
After all, it seems to what Paul did in his witnessing to the Gospel.

It's OK.
I'm just kidding, hopefully to get your attention.
But this crazy idea about being church
came from our texts over the past couple of weeks.

I hadn't noticed it before, but what I suggested in jest
is, in fact, how Paul worked at times.
He invited people, and particularly his opponents,
into these intense, three-day (all day) seminars
where he argues his point of view,
drawing on an extensive knowledge of the literature
about God, and Israel, and the law, and the prophets.
It's one of his primary ways of testifying to the Gospel
of Jesus Christ as Lord and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Noticing and reflecting upon this strategy of Paul's
did get me to the point of wondering
how faithful we are in testifying to God's kingdom
here at Brentwood,
and in many other churches like us.

If church was a numbers game,
and for the most part it isn't,
then we would have to acknowledge
that a lot of churches are miserable failures.

Five years ago, a lot of Presbyterians
in the greater Vancouver area through about Brentwood that way,
deciding on three separate occasions that we should be closed.

But most of the members then showed up *en masse*
at the meetings that were going to approved that recommendation
and convinced the Presbytery they still had a future,
with the right kind of encouragement, support, and leadership.

Jim Smith from Central Presbyterian Church
and Don Hill, then a critical care chaplain at St. Paul's Hospital
came and started working with that dedicated and determined
little group who were not ready to pack it in.

Then I came along to help with some visioning and strategizing
and got invited to the party.

Now, we're one of the fastest growing churches in the Presbytery.

This past year alone, we grew in membership by over 50%.

Our givings for operations and special projects, like the chairs,
were remarkable by any standards.

And our dedication and determination to testify to the Kingdom
of which Jesus is Lord
grows stronger week by week.

That, more than any numbers, is what really important about church.

So, what about this 'testifying' stuff?

How do we do it?

How do we do it faithfully and effectively?

We don't live in a culture

where most people are willing to spend 3 days a week,
every week,

learning about, arguing about, figuring out
what God is up to in the world.

So what do we do to be faithfully
the church of Jesus Christ in the world?

The words Luke uses in our text this morning provides some interesting ideas to pursue. In the NRSV that we use here at Brentwood, the Greek words are translated 'testify to' and 'convince.' Paul's conversations with his opponents and those listening in are emphatic declarations of the way he sees the world now that he has appreciated and aligned with what the one true God who created everything is doing for the world in Jesus, the Christ. He draws on the law of Moses and the prophets to explain and argue for the truth of his assertions. It's clear from his writings, as we shall see in the weeks ahead, that he has a deep knowledge of this body of wisdom, deep enough that he can get to the simplicity beyond its complexity. In doing that, he had some help from his Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, the One in whom God fulfilled all the promises contained in the law and the prophets. That help came in the form of a summary of the law and prophets. We review it often here at Brentwood, as one of the key 'melodies' that we play in our conversations. Luke's version of the summary, found in the 10th chapter of his Gospel, reads this way:

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

This is what life is like in the Kingdom of God. This is what people find when they accept Christ's invitation to live their lives 'in Christ' as participants in God's Kingdom. Loving in all of these ways – God, others, and self – is what we were created to do as fully alive, flourishing human beings. In friendship and followership with Jesus Christ, all these things are possible.

That's the essence of Paul's testimony. He can get as complicated and comprehensive as the best of the rabbis of his day and age. But he can also get as concise and clear as Jesus himself. "Faith, hope, and love abide," he writes to the Corinthians, "but the greatest of these is love."

What a shift from the Saul we first met on the Damascus road, a man filled with fear, dread, and loathing.

His encounter with the risen Christ,
the One whom he has been working against with such zeal,
had transformed his work and witness.
His came out of his blindness with a whole new perspective on the world.

He saw things differently.
And he had such trust and confidence
in the One who gave him this new perspective
that he focused his energy on testifying to his purpose and power
and creating opportunities for the Holy Spirit to convince others
of its truth, goodness, and beauty.

Paul's conviction and dedication are alive and well
here at Brentwood.
We do things differently than Paul did,
but our intent is the same,
our Gospel is the same,
and our trust in God's grace to make us effective is the same.

Even though we like our learning in smaller doses than Paul offered,
we are with Paul in wanting to understand more about
what God is doing for the world in Jesus, the Christ,
and how we are being invited, constantly and persistently,
to participate in that work
as the human beings God created us to be.

That's what we will find in greater detail
in Paul's letters to the churches he started and served.
We spend this next year reading through them
and reflecting on their significance for us
as we appreciate more and align better with
the glory/energy of God that encounters us in Jesus Christ.

We won't spend three days straight, twelve hours a day,
every week, doing this.
But we will invite those participating in this revived congregation
to work through, with the help of the Spirit,
just what God is up to in the world
and how best we can take up the invitation to participate in that.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far
more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*