

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

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

A Profile of Pastor Paul 1 – Sight Restored

Jan 4, 2015

**Ps 147:12-20 & Acts 9:1-22
(563, 548, 530, 556)**

On Friday night,
I prayed with the family at the bedside of Frank Marr
in the Cardiac Card Unit at VGH
as he struggled to recovery
from a serious heart incident.
Frank is the husband of Pam Marr,
a regular participant in Brentwood's work and witness
for the past couple of years.

On Saturday afternoon, I was in Victoria
for the funeral of a brother in ministry, Ian Victor,
with whom I had been Minister-in-Association
at West Vancouver Presbyterian Church
in the 1990s.

Ian played a crucial role in my growth in allegiance to Jesus Christ
during some of the toughest times in my life.
He died of complications two days after a heart attack he had on Christmas Eve.
He was 62.

But I was not alone in either of those situations.
Both times I was in Jesus Christ,
surrounded and sustained by the energy of his love,
comforted and encouraged by the faith
that he was present in power.
Both times I was with others who accepted his lordship
as the prime allegiance in their lives
and aligned themselves with that force in the world
to flourish blessing God's creation
in every way they could imagine and discover.

I was a participant in the mission that God inaugurated in Jesus Christ,
the mission that has a community - the Christian Church,
the mission that has a purpose – a world the enjoys hospitality, justice, and peace,
the mission that Pastor Paul got caught up in so long ago
after the transformation he experienced near and in Damascus.

Between his call near Damascus sometime around 34
and his execution in Rome sometime around 60,
Paul of Tarsus preached, taught, and practiced the Christian Gospel
throughout the Roman Empire.

He founded communities of those
who were encountered by God in Jesus Christ,
who were transformed by that encounter through the work of the Holy Spirit,
who were nourished into an allegiance to Jesus as Lord
that made them participants in the mission of God
to save the world through hospitality, justice, and peace.

He wrote pastoral letters to those communities
to nourish their flourishing in this new way of seeing the world.
He argued fervently in those letters
against ways of seeing things
that denied, distorted, or dismissed
the central truth of the Gospel that had grasped him.

Paul's Gospel, the truth that had grasped him on the Damascus road,
was that in Jesus of Nazareth, God had fulfilled all his promises to Israel.
God had acted in the midst of history to save the world.
God had come to all humanity
to reconcile with them and thus bring the whole of creation
to its divinely-appointed fulfillment
as a community of hospitality, justice, and peace.

We will come back to this over and over again this year,
as we explore the wisdom that this early Christian enthusiast
has to guide us and sustain us today in North Burnaby
on how to continuously improve in being the church in Jesus Christ.

The focus of his writing was what it meant
to participate in the mission of this community,
to be a mission with a community rather than a community with a mission,
to be the church in Jesus Christ.

It was that Jesus whose energy surrounded and sustained me this weekend.
It is that Jesus we gather to worship, to learn from, to belong to, and to serve
this morning around this family table.
It will be that Jesus who guides and carries us through this coming week,
no matter what happens in our lives
as we participate ever more consciously in his mission for the world.

As I have been preparing for this sermon series for 2015
on Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom Pastor Paul,
I have been paying attention to the text in its contexts.
That is fancy language for talking about the meaning of what Paul has written
in its original setting for its original readers and hearers
and in our setting for us as followers of Jesus, the Christ.

His advice and admonitions
were forged in the heat of participating in God's mission
through Christian communities in a hostile environment.

The hostilities took various forms.
The emerging Christian movement
was seen as subversive
by some in positions of religious and political power.
It was scandalous to others who followed different systems of meaning.
Some, who looked down on any kind of religious enthusiasm,
saw it as foolish.

In addition, there was probably a majority of people
in the various centres of population where Paul founded congregations
who simply ignored this marginal movement.

It's not hard to find parallels to these attitudes today
in the midst of our contemporary urban environments.

There are those in power who see the kinds of things churches do,
like hospitality for refugees, justice for temporary foreign workers,
and peace for the environment,
as a threat to their position and power.
The Harper government targets nonprofits seeking this kind of social change
for removal or disruption of their charitable status.
The doors of this country are increasingly difficult to get through
for those in need of sanctuary from war, oppression, and persecution.
Environmental protection measures are systematically removed or ignored
by governments and corporations at all levels.

For some of our neighbours, all this Christian stuff
is simply an affront to their reason.
A God who takes flesh, who dies, who is resurrected,
is silly and delusional,
a mental crutch for those weaklings and fools who need it.
How can anyone give their allegiance to such a fairy tale?

For an increasing majority, especially in our urban centres,
Christianity is simply on ignore, not a factor in their lives.

Given these similarities, and many more we will discover together,
I'm curious about what wisdom Paul's inspired writing can offer us
as we nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

I'm curious about what this pastor experienced in worship
that sustained and guided him in his challenging ministries.

I'm curious about what he learned from his conversations
with the communities he founded and served
as they listened together for what the Spirit was saying
through their consideration of the Scriptures.

I'm curious about how Paul understood his participation
in the mission of God's reign of hospitality, justice, and peace
that he saw starting its final phase of realization in Jesus Christ.

I'm curious about how all of that fed and formed
his ways of serving the creation God had saved in Jesus Christ.
And, finally, I'm curious about what the Spirit has in store for us
here at Brentwood Presbyterian Church during 2015
as we explore together how the wisdom of Pastor Paul
can deepen and strengthen our allegiance to Jesus Christ
as we align ourselves together to be the blessings
God has called us to be in our time and places.

We'll get to know Paul a bit better over the next couple of weeks.

Then we'll spend a few Sundays on each of the letters
that scholars agree were probably written by Paul himself -
1 Thessalonians (50-51), 1&2 Corinthians (54), Galatians (55), Romans (56), and
Philippians & Philemon (58).

New perspectives on Paul and his wisdom
have emerged in the last 3-4 decades,
as more becomes known about the first century Palestinian Judaism
in the midst of which he worked and witnessed.

The most convincing of those perspectives so far in my study
has been that of N T Wright, now a research professor at St. Andrew's University
and formerly the Bishop of Durham in England.

He's a person I respect as a 'pracademic,'
one who takes his scholarly insights and applies them to the realities
of being the church in Jesus Christ on a daily basis.

I'm sure others will emerge as wise guides for me this year,
but Tom Wright is worthy of mention as we begin.

As in all of our work and witness here at Brentwood,
I trust this focus for the year will nourish us to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
so we can participate more fully in God's mission
of hospitality, justice, and peace in and for the world.