

What Paul Thought about Saul
Lesson: I Peter 2:2-10, Acts 7:55-60

When we say "the gospels" we generally mean Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But we really should include the book of Acts. Acts is the story of the beginning of the early church, especially those first miracle events of Pentecost and the way the new 12 became "apostles" and leaders. It then records the spread of the movement into Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, and all the way to Rome. That means that Paul becomes the major character in the spread of the gospel. Why include Acts in the gospels?...because it is really Part 2 of the Gospel of Luke. Luke wrote Acts, and the very first sentence of Acts ties it back to the gospel.

Sometimes, an account like we read here is very straightforward. Our lesson is about the stoning of Stephen - not one of the apostles, but a leader in the very early church in Jerusalem and the first follower who gives his life for his commitment to Jesus. The Sanhedrin that was a combination of Archbishops and Senators – powers religious and political. They deliberated and authorized a Council to judge and execute Stephen. Leaders of the Pharisees literally picked up the stones. Stephen is so serious about being a follower of Jesus that he acts like Jesus to the very end and forgives his murderers while they start throwing rocks.

Sometimes with an account like this one, the writer says something incidentally that later becomes a major revelation, and Luke includes this one sentence: "The witnesses left their cloaks in the care of a young man named Saul." Saul was a young, trusted protégé in the Sanhedrin that stoned Stephen, the same body that convicted Jesus of blasphemy and conspired with the Governor to crucify him.

Why does Luke know so much about Saul? ...because Luke is the protégé of a man named Paul who used to be named Saul. Paul is a different person from Saul, because he is converted and becomes committed to Jesus. The man who becomes the major leader in the growth of the church had been a direct enemy of Jesus and the movement of his followers after the resurrection.

Like Jesus, Saul was trained from his earliest days of synagogue in Torah and Prophets and Psalms, in teaching and worship. He was proud of his pedigree traced back in the tribe of Benjamin. Identified early as "gifted," he would have been brought to the temple and school in Jerusalem to intensify his preparation to lead "God's chosen people." Saul was not just a "believer"; he was one of the chosen of the chosen, the elect, the "called." The fact that he was with the Sanhedrin for a calculated and planned act of capital punishment for blasphemy and treason says volumes

about Saul's place and promise. This bright star and brilliant hope was already on the edge of the most inner circle.

That day, Saul thought he was doing exactly what God had called him to do. He was following God's will, and sure of it. If Saul had expressed any doubts, anyone around him would have told him so. They were all united in the same mind. For the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, and Saul having "faith" meant that you were firm in your beliefs, sure that you were on God's side, and being faithful meant never questioning. Anyone who did was not just wrong; they were an enemy of *the* faith. When the Faith was under attack by people who said you are wrong about anything, you defended the Faith. It was in the Bible: "Vengeance in mine" says the Lord. ...And "I am the Lord's servant," said the Sanhedrin and Saul.

There is a very old warning in the Reformed Tradition from which we Presbyterians were born. "There is nothing more dangerous than a Calvinist off his knees." Presbyterians get in trouble when they stop praying to ask God what we should do, and start telling others what God told us they should do. We have had times when we thought we were the "elect," and "double predestination" meant the ones who lost in the divine election were headed for hell. We have had times when we were too sure our plans and designs for the world were drawn up by God's architects: like the divine right of kings right there is the Bible, or segregation of the races right there in the Bible, or women should never be ordained because the Bible says they should not teach a man in church and be submissive at home, or people with a genetic defects are sinners and should be isolated and treated differently - like lepers or blind people or birth defects or Samaritans or Muslims or homosexuals. What should we do about people like me with high cholesterol?

The reason we don't want them around us is that hint of uncertainty they give us when they call our cherished beliefs into question. Knowing them forces us to change what we think about them. Saul lived in a very small world where everyone looked and thought the same. But there was Stephen who was obviously a man full of faith, a man who reminded Saul of his enemy Jesus. Neither Jesus nor Stephen would ever think of stoning anyone, even when someone was killing them. Luke tells us about Saul standing there, because Paul told Luke about the first time God woke up Saul's conscience and penetrated his armor of certainty.

It becomes much easier to accuse people of blasphemy when we think we are judging them as if we were God (and committing blasphemy ourselves). The best protection we have our secret uncertainty, so we avoid our spiritual discomfort when we are around someone who is really faithful. Those people who make us wonder if we should listen to our doubts. What would happen to us if we admitted

that we might have been listening too closely to the people around us instead of listening to other people who are really listening to God?

Paul is nothing like the Saul he used to be, and he does not forget the way he was because he gives thanks for the love of God that did not give up on him when he was blinded by what he already saw. Paul was never going back to the Saul life. Instead of being sure of everything like Saul was, Paul is only sure of one thing. Want to know what Paul thought of Saul when he looked back and thanked God for forgiveness and grace that had saved him? Listen to Paul's own confession. Listen to what Paul thought about Saul:

Phil. 3:5 I was circumcised when I was a week old. I am an Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a pure-blooded Hebrew. As far as keeping the Jewish Law is concerned, I was a Pharisee, and I was so zealous that I persecuted the church. As far as a person can be righteous by obeying the commands of the Law, I was without fault.

But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake. Not only those things; I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him. I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith. All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life. I do not claim that I have already succeeded or have already become perfect. I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself.

Of course, my friends, I really do not think that I have already won it; the one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above. All of us who are spiritually mature should have this same attitude.

Like Stephen and Paul, we need to spend more time on our knees asking Christ to make us more like him. We might take this Prayer of Confession every week more seriously as a time when we confess the ways that we have been too sure of ourselves when we were doing or saying things we could never imagine Jesus doing or saying. We might be sure of only one thing: that the good news for everyone is that Jesus Christ came to forgive everyone's sins, that no one is perfect – including us, that we should ask for forgiveness after we have forgiven the people who have sinned against us, just like we say every week in that prayer Jesus taught us to pray.

Trying to be like Christ and making that the main motive in every action and word of our living will never make us perfect, will it always make us less certain and teach us to be very careful when we think someone else is wrong about something. Trying to live like Jesus will never be easy. Like Paul we must remember that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, and Jesus told us to treat other sinners the way we want God to treat us. Being more like Paul than Saul may not do much to change the people around us who are so sure that they are ready to stone anyone who thinks or does differently. But trying to be like our Lord, we can remind them that Jesus is the one who said that the only people who can throw stones are the ones who have no sin at all. He was the only one who was like us in every way – except, of course, he was less certain of some things than we are. I think we can all be pretty sure Jesus never even thought about picking up a stone.