

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Program, Person, Presentation

The Second Sunday After Pentecost, Year C

June 6, 2010

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Galatians 1:11-24

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. ¹² I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. ¹³ For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ I saw none of the other apostles--only James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. ²¹ Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. ²² I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they praised God because of me.

Our reading from the first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Galatians gives us a fascinating glimpse of Paul's autobiography. I don't know about you, but I find biographies and autobiographies intriguing. As a Christian, I'm always interested in how someone's spiritual or religious background has affected their lives. Right now I'm reading David McCullough's biography of Harry Truman, the

33rd President of the United States. Truman was a Southern Baptist from Jackson County, Missouri, which had been a stronghold of Democratic politics for generations. The Democratic Party was so strong in that area that McCullough says, “You were born and raised a Democrat, just as you were born and raised a Baptist or a Roman Catholic.” From McCullough’s point of view, a person didn’t arrive at their political views or their religious convictions on their own. They were most likely handed down from their parents and grandparents.

In this little bit of autobiography this morning, Paul says that in his life, just the opposite is true. He emphasizes that it is common knowledge that he was born and brought up in the traditions and teachings of Judaism. It’s also a matter of record that he was so zealous that he rounded up and imprisoned Jewish people who departed from those traditions and teachings by become Christians. But he says that he didn’t come by the good news of Jesus Christ which he had preached to his readers through his parents or grandparents—or through any tradition or any teaching from any human being on this earth, **“rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”**

Like many of his fellow Jews, before Christ revealed himself in him, Paul saw life with God as a program. The idea was that Judaism was a system of duties and expectations that are handed down from one generation to the next. That’s the meaning of the word “tradition”—something handed from one person to another. And the religious program has definite teachings, which of course in Paul’s case were the Pharisees’ rules that prevented a person from breaking the Old Testament Law.

Before his conversion to Christ, what motivated Paul to go after Jews who had become followers of Jesus Christ and round them up and have them thrown in jail? It was his complete commitment. Like many other faithful and religious Jews, he saw Christianity as a new sect in Judaism. Its members were threatening to destroy the traditions and institutions he held sacred and precious. As a committed and faithful Jew, he saw it as his duty to stamp out this deviant danger to his people’s way of life. He was a one-man bulldozer, rolling over any and every Christian he could find.

But one day Jesus suddenly jammed the transmission on Paul’s religious bulldozer into reverse. On his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to round up the Jews there who believed in Jesus, Jesus appeared to him. Paul had an encounter with the very person he was fighting against by persecuting his people. Jesus asked him, **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁵ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.”** (Acts 9:4-5)

All this time Paul thought he was fighting a program of wrong traditions and wrong teaching. He thought that by punishing the people who were handing on these dangerous traditions and teachings about Jesus, he could get rid of the traditions and teaching. But his encounter with Jesus completely shocked him. In a flash he saw the real truth: it wasn't a program he was up against. It was a person, the person Jesus Christ, who called him by name. After Jesus had gotten Paul's attention, he sent Ananias, one of the disciples in Damascus, to tell Paul what his assignment would be: **“to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.” (Acts 9:15)**

Ananias laid his hands on Saul, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us, **“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, ‘Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’” (Acts 9:20-21)** So almost immediately, Paul began to present not a program of Christianity, but the person of Jesus to his fellow Jews. And like Paul, they too were shocked, but for different reasons.

What's your biography like when it comes to Jesus Christ? Like Harry Truman, most of us were “born into” some Christian denomination. Most of us were raised in the “traditions of our fathers”: you know, putting on nice clothes and going to church on Sundays, saying, “Yes, Ma'am,” and “No, sir”, and leading good moral and ethical lives. We have been taught correct doctrines like the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the Scriptures as the Word of God, and so forth. We're aware of our Christian duties and practices: being baptized and confirmed, taking communion, pledging to the church, going to Bible studies, helping the poor, and so forth.

All of these things are helpful and support our life in Christ, but they're not Christ himself. We need to examine ourselves. We need to make sure we don't slip into the idea that our life in Christ is a program of traditions and teachings. We should remind ourselves that the gospel of Christ is the good news that God has come to us in a person, Jesus. As Paul learned, and as he told the Galatians, this good news **“is not something that man made up. ¹² I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”**

Jesus reveals himself to his people. He doesn't send a program to follow or a list of practices to engage in, he comes himself, personally. For some of us, Jesus comes the way he came to Paul. We have a single, definitive experience of conversion to Christ we can point back to. For others, he comes gradually. Over a period of months or even years, he grows a conviction in us that we are sinners

and we need him and not more good deeds or Bible studies or whatever other religious program elements we've been relying on.

Because Jesus is a person, we maintain our relationship with him just as we do with any other person. We spend time with him. We talk to him in prayer, and he talks to us. He speaks to us in Scripture, and in prayer and in worship and through other members of his body, the church. Because his Holy Spirit is in us, he is always with us to assure us that his death on the cross pays for our sins as we confess them to him every day. He strengthens us and guides us through his Word to live more and more as he lived.

When Jesus came to Paul, he radically re-centered Paul's life around himself. Paul was no longer focused on the religious program of Judaism. His one aim now was to proclaim the love and beauty and grace and kindness of the person who had revealed himself to him. That's what happens when Jesus comes. He re-centers our lives around himself, because he is our life and our salvation.

Because Jesus is a person, we can introduce other people to him, as in "May I present Jesus Christ, the Ruler of the Universe and the Savior of Humankind." Introducing people to Jesus isn't just a matter of inviting them to a program like a service or a retreat or a Bible study. Those can be good ways to introduce someone to Jesus.

But Jesus is always available for introductions. Paul said God was **"pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles."** Jesus reveals himself not just to us, but in us. He lives in us. By his death on the cross, he's made all the difference! We can trade in our struggles of trying to keep to a worn-out religious program for a person, Jesus, whose loving gift of himself on the cross cleanses us daily from guilt and regret and shame. He reveals himself in us daily as he guides us and comforts us and strengthens us. And he reveals himself in us to those around us in our behavior, or attitudes, and our love for them, which comes from knowing Jesus' love for us.

Whether they go to church or practice any religion, all human beings need what God has given us in Jesus Christ—a relationship with himself. God bases our relationship with him in his loving sacrifice of himself in the person of Christ, which cleanses and makes whole every person who encounters him. Paul learned that real life was not a program, but a person, Jesus. He received him, was filled with his Spirit, and presented him to others in the power of that same Spirit. Let us pray for God's grace to do the same.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for revealing yourself to us. Fill us with your Holy Spirit. Give us grace to seek after you and find you. Pour your love into our

hearts, the same love you have for those who do not yet know you. And give us wisdom and skill to present you to them for their great good and your glory. Amen.