

“PATIENCE”
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; Romans 8:12-25
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How many of you have trouble reading and understanding the apostle Paul? Well, you’re in good company. I’d like to begin this morning by giving you some background on Paul that may, I hope, be helpful. So, three things to remember about Paul no matter which of his letters you’re reading. First, Paul began his life as a faithful Jew and a citizen of the Roman empire—which means that he most likely came from a wealthy and educated background. Secure in who he was, one day Paul had a vision on the road to Damascus that transformed his entire consciousness. He came to know the crucified and Risen Christ of God, and what that meant for him was that in an overarching way, none of the distinctions between persons that had guided his life in the past were real any more. None of them mattered to God. In the radical freedom of Jesus Christ, he proclaimed, there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. A staggering revelation. And so began Paul’s life as a Christian missionary, and in his communications with the congregations he knew or wanted to know—as in the case of this morning’s letter to the Romans—in these letters, Paul attempted to work out the meaning of his revelation in the fullness of all of life. Paul’s new understanding of freedom went counter to everything Paul had grown up knowing and believing as a man of his culture. And so, when we read the Pauline documents of the New Testament, we need to read them as the work of a man in process, a man who sometimes has a profound and almost lyrical understanding of the freedom of being in Christ, and other times has not quite yet gotten it. A man like us, interestingly, working out day by day what it means for the content of his faith to pervade all of his life.

Second, Paul addresses a church made up of two distinct groups: Christian Jews who are familiar and comfortable with the history, traditions, and language of Judaism, and gentile Christians who know next to nothing about the history, traditions, and language of Judaism. The gentiles live in the Greco-Roman philosophical world. They haven’t a clue who Abraham or Moses are. They know nothing of old covenants or new covenants. They only know their life has been transformed by their experience of the Risen Christ. As Paul writes, he is constantly switching lanes—addressing Jew or gentile in a language familiar to each group, and trying to build a bridge of common language between two entirely separate populations.

So here’s Paul in the process of creating his own faith, trying to create as well an understanding of the meaning of Christ that will speak to the diverse communities of what, at this point in time, we might call the “Jesus movement.” And he does this because what he is reaching for is an entirely new faith paradigm that will create a new world order. “The whole creation,” Paul asserts, “has been groaning in labor pains until now.” And what he believes he is creating now is the world beyond the old divisions, the world where the covenant between God and humankind stretches back to Adam, ancestor of all. There is before him the possibility of a whole new way of people of all backgrounds, cultures, and nations being one, understanding and celebrating their likeness beyond their dissimilarity, a radical shift from the way things have been to the coming

kingdom of God.

So that's your history lesson for today: Paul, working out his own faith; writing letters moving back and forth between the language and culture of Jews and gentiles, trying in the midst of all that to create something entirely new—beyond Jew and gentile, beyond slave or free, beyond male or female, or rich or poor—a new community of those whose oneness in Christ is their only important defining characteristic.

As I was thinking about Paul and his mission last week, I found my thoughts straying more and more often to our denomination, the United Christ of Christ, which celebrated its 48th birthday last month. The people who founded this denomination had a vision very much like Paul's: to create beyond the sectarian divides that had come to characterize the Church a new kind of body, a body where there is neither Calvinist nor Lutheran, Pentecostal nor Congregationalist, no barrier of race or class, or peripheral doctrine, or, as the denomination has moved forward, no barrier of gender, physical ability, or sexual orientation. Who we are in the United Church of Christ is not about political correctness, although we have been misunderstood that way; more profoundly, we are a church that for 48 years now has consciously attempted to fulfill the Pauline vision of a community that transcends cultural distinctions, a community united only in the confession of Jesus Christ as savior, lord, guide, and friend.

And for the United Church of Christ, as for Paul, it is not easy to try to birth this new community. I was reading on the UCC website some of the pronouncements that came out of General Synod, which just ended a week ago. I read the stuff our church puts out, and I think of Paul 2000 years ago. Like Paul, we in the UCC are still figuring out what it means to live as consciously and celebrationally diverse. How do we know how wide we can draw the circle without losing our center? And as we decide, how do we translate what we know of Christ in words that speak to the rapidly growing number of Samoan and Hispanic Pentecostal churches that are part of us and also speak to old-time New England Congregationalists and the German speaking members of the Calvin Synod. We have members of this denomination who are theologically as conservative as any Baptist and those who are closeted or not so closeted Unitarians. How do we speak of our spiritual life together in ways that have meaning for all? We are looking for a language that will do justice for the whole church.

I confess that when I read the apostle Paul, I alternate between thinking he is wandering in the wilderness, speaking a foreign language, banging his head against a wall, or touching the holiness of our God in ways that only few have achieved. Quite frankly, he can do all those things in a single paragraph! When I read the pronouncements of our denomination, it's not so different: turgid, circular, mealy-mouthed, incomprehensible, and at moments, profound, moving, speaking to a spiritual reality that we look to, that we are engaged in, but is not yet here. In previous drafts of this sermon I tried to bring you specific examples, but all of them require too much background. I urge you, though, to go to the UCC website—ucc.org—and take a look for yourself. You'll see what I mean, and maybe it will help you with Paul, and maybe—if you, like me, are sometimes driven to distraction by the way our denomination works—maybe it will help you with that too.

“The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains^{1/4}in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees. But we hope for what we do not see, and we wait for it with patience.”

Like Paul, we in the United Church of Christ are engaged in creating a new reality for the church, and we are not there yet. We argue, we bicker, we fall back on the norms of culture and class, and then we pick ourselves up and take another halting step forward. We don't always know what we're doing. We are instead what one UCC theologian, Walter Bruggeman, calls “prisoners of hope, bound to a vision of the kingdom of God that is among us and within us, but still not yet.” And we are to wait patiently for that vision's coming.

Wait patiently^{1/4}like Paul. I don't know about you all, but when I think of patience, I usually think of marking time between now and the coming of whatever I'm waiting for. But that is not patience; it's just wasting time. Paul waited patiently for the coming of the new reality of God in Christ. In other words, he worked for it day in and day out, when he could see the vision “this close,” and when he was utterly lost. He got up every morning, preached the gospel, loved the church. Some days he got it just right; some days^{1/4}well, we all know what Paul was like on those other days. But every day, he got up and said his prayers, and worked one more day to make real what he had never seen. God calls us to wait patiently as well. As a denomination, as individuals, we are to wait patiently for that which is our deepest hope: the coming of a world of justice beyond division; of love beyond boundaries, the coming of the true realm of God. So wait patiently. Get to work! Thanks be to God. Amen.