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Whose Gospel Is It Anyway?
Acts 28:23-31

The Apostle Paul is tired of religious people. For eighteen chapters since his conversion, Paul's been debating with his old brethren, the temple leaders, attempting to convince them that this Jesus character is the Jewish messiah, using proofs and arguments from the Hebrew Scriptures. Sometimes he gets a win, and most of the time he doesn't, and he's tired. I don't blame him. I mean, have you met religious people? To be fair, most of us avoid religious debates like the plague, and with the holidays coming up, few of us are likely to go back on our staunch commitment to that brand of conflict avoidance.

It's important to remember just who exactly Paul's fighting with. Of course, Paul's conflict is with Jewish people, but way back in verse seventeen, he identifies the people he's talking with as Jewish leaders. These are not your average Sabbath pew sitters — these are the religious elite, the ones who went to the best schools and are leaders in the nice neighborhoods and have the fanciest attire. As far as I can tell, Paul has no major conflict with the average Jew. It's the really, really religious ones, the leaders in the big cities at the largest synagogues that he's got a problem with.

This is all pretty familiar territory if you remember Jesus' ministry. Remember all those conflicts he came into? Nine times out of ten, or better, it was with the religious leaders. And what did he have to say about them? That they were doing their job poorly, and that the people had become like sheep without shepherds. They had abandoned their duty to the Law and to the people they served, instead serving their own interests. His problem wasn't that they were especially religious, but that their religiosity wasn't translating into caring for the people.

So as we get to our final week of our sermon series on Acts, it's not too late to be reminded again that the interreligious conflicts in Acts aren't really about Jews versus Gentiles as they appear to be. They're about the stubborn religious establishment versus God's vibrant presence and movement in the world. In the past weeks, we've been reminded that people have often used words of Christian scripture to hatefully pit Christians against Jews, but close readings of the texts show that this interpretation entirely misses the point, and that the point is really about an indictment of lackluster and complacent religious leadership, not of an entire religion.

It's not hard to see the irony in having me or Pastor Rachel or Pastor Camille give a sermon about Paul's frustration with old-fashioned and slow-to-change religious

leaders. I'm a pastor in a denomination that is known for, if nothing else, our near inability to navigate our complex constitutional process in order to make substantive change to the way we do things. In case you're unfamiliar with how Presbyterians do things behind the scenes, be reminded that our U.S. Congress is based largely on the same principles as Presbyterian governance.

We are indeed the religious people, the stewards of not only the faith but the traditions that often make us what we are, and it sounds like Paul might be a little bit tired of us. Tired of the endless theological debates, tired of the rules and procedures, tired of decent and in order. So he's done, he's moving on, and offers a searing indictment of religious people using the words of Isaiah — "You will indeed listen but never understand, you will indeed look but never perceive. This people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes." Tough words for the bearers of the mantle of religious tradition.

So, right here and now, halfway through this service, should we pack up and go home? If we think that Paul's exasperation might also be for people like us, and not just for some temple leaders 2000 years ago, have we come full circle and gotten it wrong as well? Of course I hope not, but perhaps it's time to listen to the frustration in Paul's words. Prophetic words can often carry a rhetorical edge on purpose, because they make us stop, pause, and listen.

There's certainly a rebuke to be heard in the listening, and it's one that is echoed through the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures alike. From the very beginning to the very end, the words tell us to watch that we don't turn a living faith into nothing more than bland doctrine. That we ensure that our vibrant communal life doesn't devolve into an endless series of "dos" and "don'ts." What we don't turn the living, active God into a series of principles and ideas. Throughout the ages, one of the risks of institutionalization is that we surround the living, breathing core of faith with trappings and structure, and over time forget what it was that made the structures helpful and necessary to begin with.

But prophetic words hardly ever come without a word of hope as well, without a vision for what could be. Implicit in Paul's frustration is a hope he feels in the God that transcends the religious leaders' visions, a God that exists immeasurably more outside the confines of the temples and synagogues and churches. It's the God that since Paul fell off his horse and came to Jesus, so to speak, that he's been trying to show the people.

If our imaginations for who God is and what God can do can sometimes be limited, God's imagination certainly is not. When Solomon dedicates the temple that his father David imagined, the most magnificent place the people had ever seen, he cries, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!"

When Paul rebukes the religious leaders, it's only because he has seen something that they haven't yet, that the God they all commonly believe in is already out in the world far beyond anything they can imagine. Jesus has left the building. And so yes, Paul has become weary of talking to the religious leaders, and his sense of call is quite firmly to the Gentiles, in large part because he won't have to fight within his own religious tradition. He's looking forward to open ears.

So Paul seems to be done with the religious leaders. Perhaps he would even be done with us. But God? Let's not underestimate the patience of God. I am still quite convinced that he's not nearly done with us.

And based on the evidence, I think there's ample reason for hope. I can't tell you how many people I've talked to who have registered their surprise with the vibrancy of our congregation here at the corner of P and 31st. We are amongst the oldest churches in the city, we have a pretty traditional worship style, and well, Presbyterians don't exactly have the best reputation for fun and excitement. You can imagine the stereotypes people might have about an old Georgetown church. And yet time after time, I'm reminded how truly alive this place is, watching members dressing up as Biblical characters to tell stories to children, seeing the enthusiasm around Bible study and contemplative prayer, nearly having to turn back volunteers who want to serve meals and have dinner with our guests during the winter shelter, and bringing passion and dedication to look for innovative new ways to care for refugee families who are right in our backyard and continuing to hope and search for their new life here.

And to be honest, many of those new innovations have hit me by surprise. Not that I doubt the passion of the people here, but it's often the things that I wasn't expecting that are the places I find God most active. But isn't that the story of the book of Acts? Over and over, the people get an idea in their head about what to do and where to go, and over and over, God has another idea, leading the people by hook or by crook to something new. The early church, forced out of Jerusalem by conflict, only to magnify and grow. The devout Jew, Peter, instructed in a dream to break kosher laws, and more importantly, to welcome in people he'd never thought of before. The Ethiopian eunuch. Paul and Silas converting their own jailer. In not a single one of these stories do the

apostles get an idea, execute it, and say well done. Instead, each time they're derailed by the Holy Spirit, called only to be faithful and to follow God's lead.

Both the book of Acts and our own experience are profound reminders that the Gospel is not ours. It's God's and God will do with it what he wants. Or perhaps as that saying goes that's variously attributed to Groucho Marx, Mark Twain, and others, "if you want to make God laugh, just tell him your plans."

So what are we good religious people supposed to do, seeing as how it seems to be the Holy Spirit's job to thwart our plans and make better ones. Well, I suppose that's not an entirely fair assessment. The apostles did make plans, they formed relationships, they prepared and studied, they went on their voyages, but they must have learned after enough experience to hold on to their plans loosely. They had to have learned the balance between their own visions and God's, or perhaps they simply became better at being attentive to the moments when God seemed to be going a different way than they'd planned.

I had a friend in seminary who was planning a major event, and as with all major events with multiple speakers, tech setup, permits, promotional materials, and everything else that goes with that, it was becoming a major point of stress. Or it should have been, but she seemed alright, and so we were talking about the planning, and she said something to me that's stuck with me ever since. "I plan just enough." Plan just enough to make sure the basics happen, the lights are on and the people show up, but not so much that there's no flexibility.

Plan just enough. So often in our lives we're tempted to plan for every contingency, and it gets to be more than overwhelming. And here at church, we can be tempted to theologize God into ways that become manageable and easily understood, and then put a system of governance on it so we know when and where everything should happen. But we may be planning too much.

I think our traditions are wonderful and beautiful, and I think they keep us centered as the world rocks and shakes around us. But let's hold onto them not too tightly. If we find that we worship our traditions or our building or our history instead of God, that's probably a good indication that we're veering from deep faith to blind religiosity. Instead, let's make sure we're open just enough to breaking the rules when it seems like God might be sending us on a different path. In fact, some of our finest moments are those in which we allow ourselves to respond to the unexpected with a vision of possibility and hope, rather than rejection.

God's not done with us religious folks, and we know that because we have seen the presence of the Holy Spirit in this community. So let's not forget to follow that same Spirit outside of our comfort areas, outside of our church walls, even outside of our traditions. In just a few days of jarring headlines, we're reminded once again that the world is deeply longing for the power of God that breaks divisions, that heals the wounded, that ceases violence, and that proclaims a beloved community in which each person is valued as a child of God and values one another likewise. The world needs that strong and loving God as much as it ever has, and the Spirit will not be slowed down by people trying to dot their i's and cross their t's.

Look around. Actually look around at the eight panels of Scripture carved into this building. The walls in this room tell a story that the walls cannot themselves contain. Will we be a part of that story? Amen.