

You may know that we have been in the news this week. And by we I mean the Presbyterian Church (USA). The Presbyterian Church (USA) or PCUSA has been in the news over same gender marriage. This morning I am going to reflect some over what has occurred but before we do that I want us to focus on something even more important. I want to direct us to the book of Acts in the Bible.

Over the past several weeks we have been reading through the book of Acts. We have been reading through the book in order to catch a glimpse of what the early church was like so that we can better understand what we are to be like. If we understand the early church better then maybe we can sense what God wants us to be doing in ministry.

Over the last couple of weeks we have read some out of Paul's first two missionary journeys. Journeys that took him to the cities around the Mediterranean Sea to spread the good news about Jesus Christ. Today we are going to read about Paul's 3rd and final missionary journey that includes some miracles, a court trial, a shipwreck, and eventually arrival in the great city of Rome.

In this third missionary journey, Paul comes into the city of Athens, Greece and notices that they have lots of idols. He tells them that they are so religious that he notices that they have one idol set up for an unknown God. I guess they wanted to make sure all of the bases were covered. So Paul tells them that he knows the identity of this unknown God. Paul then uses their own language to teach them about who Jesus is.

We then read about Paul going to the town of Corinth and he stays with a couple named Priscilla and Aquila. He seeks out the two of them because the three of them are all tentmakers. Today when you have a pastor who also has a second job you say that this pastor is a tentmaker. The term "tentmaker" comes from the work that Paul did to support his ministry. Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila travel together to Ephesus and Priscilla and Aquila share the gospel.

While in Ephesus we read of how Paul went to the synagogue and spoke very boldly. Some listened to Paul and some did not. The ministry in Ephesus included both Jews and Gentiles. Here Paul was able to be used by God to do some extraordinary miracles by healing diseases and removing evil spirits.

They impacted the town so much that some of the people that practiced evil magic collected their books and burned them. These books were very expensive books.

Some in the business community did not like what Paul was doing and saying. A silversmith named Demetrius said Paul was taking away his business. Demetrius' biggest money maker was making these idols that people would worship. Paul was telling people to not worship idols made with human hands. People were responding to Paul and this was cutting into Demetrius' profit.

Paul finishes this missionary journey in the major Jewish community of Jerusalem. But many of the Jews there do not like what he is saying and what he is doing. They don't like how Gentiles are now coming to the Temple to pray. They thought that only Jewish people should be allowed into the Temple.

As one Jewish person was overheard to comment about Paul, "He has brought Greeks into this place and these Greeks have defiled it."

Paul is captured and put on trial. But rather than complain about injustice, Paul sees this public trial as an opportunity to give witness to Christ. Paul tells them about how he was a persecutor of Christians but then Jesus got a hold of him on the way to Damascus and turned his life around.

But many of the Jews in Jerusalem plotted to kill Paul. Paul's trial was moved to a new venue in order to protect him. But the judge in the case was corrupt and Paul ended up languishing in prison for over 2 years.

Paul's trial is resumed and he once again sees his trial as an opportunity to give witness to Jesus. Paul appears before the king who tells Paul that too much learning is driving Paul insane. Paul eventually appeals and asks to appear before the Roman emperor.

So Paul boards a ship and heads to the famous city of Rome. But on the way to Rome this ship hits turbulent waters and they end up shipwrecked. An angel appears to Paul and tells them that they will be fine. They end up on the tiny island of Malta. Let us read what happens there.

Read Acts 28:1-10

Eventually Paul winds up in Rome where he lives for at least two more years and shares the good news there.

In these journeys Paul trusted God to guide him to the places where he was to go. Sometimes people listened to what Paul had to say and sometimes they did not. Sometimes people conspired against Paul and sometimes people supported him. Sometimes Paul knew which town he was going to next and sometimes he was diverted to places he did not want to go.

But whether he went to places he wanted to go or whether he went to places he did not want to go, Paul used all of these opportunities to give witness to who Jesus was and that Jesus is alive. Paul never missed an opportunity to share the love of Jesus with the people that he encountered.

I began this message by referring to how we have been in the news this week. And as I shared with the reporter that contacted me, we have our 15 minutes of fame right now and we need to use this moment in time to spread the good news of the love that Jesus has for others.

I am not sure we will have another opportunity like we have right now. Reporters only show up when something dramatic or bad happens. Tomorrow we will no longer be the story.

As I shared in an email that I sent out on Friday, Providence Presbytery pastors and elected elders gathered at Clover Presbyterian Church on Thursday. Unfortunately our elder fell sick at the last minute and was unable to attend the meeting. Providence Presbytery consists of representatives and pastors from the 59 PCUSA churches in the 5 counties in our corner of South Carolina.

At the meeting the 140 people worshiped together, we ate together, and we shared together in small groups how we saw God at work in our lives. We also were tasked with the responsibility to vote on amendments to our church constitution.

One amendment was to change the wording in our Book of Order concerning marriage. The new language would define marriage as a “unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman.” The new amendment grants pastors and churches permission to perform same-gender marriages if they feel so led.

No PCUSA pastor is required to perform any marriage ceremony that they do not wish to perform and no church is required to give permission to a request to hold a marriage ceremony in their church unless the Session deems the marriage appropriate. We South Carolinians know this as States rights.

There were 89 voting commissioners in the meeting in Clover with a slight majority of elders over pastors. The vote was 50-39 in favor of the amendment. Three of the 5 presbyteries in South Carolina voted in favor of the amendment. The current voting among presbyteries is 88 in favor, 41 opposed, and 1 tie.

Our church governing structure calls for a majority of presbyteries to vote in favor of an amendment for it to be added to the constitution. There are 172 presbyteries so 86 is a majority. With a majority of presbyteries now having voted in favor the amendment will be added to the church constitution in June.

The action of our voting commissioners has caused some of you to grieve, some of you to become confused, some to become angry, and for some of you to celebrate. I have heard our church called prophetic and I have heard our church called apostate or wrong.

I will say that I was very proud of the way our presbytery conducted ourselves on Thursday. We had honest and open dialogue and all viewpoints were presented in the midst of worship, prayer, and reflection. The Rock Hill Herald sent a reporter and I am quoted in the article that appeared in Friday's edition.

I said to the newspaper reporter that I thought that this was our 15 minutes of fame. I believe it is our responsibility to use this brief moment to share a message that all are welcome into Allison Creek and the church of Jesus Christ and to find creative and innovative ways to share the good news of God's love through Jesus Christ.

There are lots of reasons that a reporter would want to attend a church meeting and most of them are not good. I hope that this brief moment of fame gives us an opportunity to model that Presbyterian Christians can disagree about some beliefs but that we affirm the love that Jesus has for all.

There are many ways to interpret this event. But this is how I am moving forward. I was in a conversation with a local teenager who told me that her friends were talking about the news that the Presbyterian Church had given its pastors and churches permission to perform same gender marriages. I asked this teenager what her friends were saying. And she said, "Well half of my friends are gay." I said, "Oh." Then she said, "They are also atheist." I said I wonder if they are atheist because they have never felt like they were welcome in a church.

I don't know if this decision is a good decision or not. Only time will tell I guess. But I am going to use the example of Paul and say that maybe we have been placed on an island and maybe we wanted to go to this place or maybe we have ended up here by a shipwreck.

But that while we are here on this island we have a calling to share the good news of God's love. There are people in our community who feel as though the church is not a welcome place. Maybe we are being called to put into action the words on the church sign out there that "All are Welcome."

I could be wrong. But while we have this spot light on us I invite us to see this as an opportunity to give witness to Jesus Christ to people that may not have ever been open to listening to that message before.

All are welcome to come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. AMEN.

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-Given: March 22, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)