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Feeling Sorry for Paul

Acts 17: 1-4, 10-12

Let's take a moment of silence and imagine a person with whom you disagree vigorously. Think of the most odious political ideologue, someone whose voice in our politics, whose presence in our community, whose power in our civic life makes you tense with contempt or shudder with rage. When they appear on television, you roll your eyes and walk away. When they speak you close your ears. Now imagine them as infants, innocent and harmless, clothed in white, bathed in the waters of baptism, held in the serene light of God's grace. Imagine this enemy truly beloved.

Ok, now that we have charity in our hearts for the most difficult people in our lives, we are ready to talk about the Apostle Paul. If the first chapters of the book of Acts contain the breathless speeches of Peter about the resurrection of Jesus, then the second half of the book is an account of Paul's tireless campaign to convert everyone to believing in Jesus. Because his first century ideas played such a large role in shaping the discriminant structures of the church, Paul is not the easiest voice for modern Christians to listen to. But I'm challenging you now to set all of those presuppositions about him aside and put yourself in Paul's shoes just for a moment. Let's imagine him as a human being. Fragile. Imperfect. Hurting.

Here we have a respected Jewish leader well known for his violence toward those outside his tradition whose life was touched by the ministry of Jesus - and you know the story, how the scales fell off his eyes and he could see the light in the famous story of his conversion. So now he is morally rehabilitated and spiritually

reformed, and his mission is to share the good news of Jesus with Jewish men like himself, who by definition are not open to the idea that Jesus is the messiah. Paul's conversion was exceptional. We have the story of Paul's conversion and the dramatic image of the scales falling from his eyes because it was so remarkable and rare for devout Jews to accept this testimony. But the Jewish sects are only a portion of Paul's campaign. His message about Jesus is also for the Gentiles, specifically for all of the Greeks living throughout the Mediterranean, who are considered by the Jews to be promiscuous and amoral. The Greeks had a reputation, especially in port cities like Corinth, for behavior that was considered by other cultures tawdry and unchaste. Paul's effort to reconcile the Greeks with the Jews explains so much of Paul's preoccupation with gender and sexual issues. Paul wants these groups which harbor serious resentments toward each other to accept Jesus. Much of what we find so objectionable about Paul comes from his strained relationship with the Jews and the Greeks. He needs them to live commodiously together in the same house.

For these people who have such profound differences to accept Jesus, they will have to give up something. For the Hebrews, they will have to accept that God is revealed through means other than the received law and scriptures. Sacred traditions like circumcision, marriage rites, and temple observance will be subject to dilution and revision. The Greeks will have to make equally significant sacrifices. Their worship of various idols will change toward monotheism. Their ethics of family and marriage and sexuality will be reshaped by the influence of Jewish law and custom. The presence of Christ will reshape and reorder every life that it touches. No community will keep its purity. Everyone will be changed.

Our passage today describes Paul's challenges on his great Mediterranean tour. He goes through such Greek places as Amphipolis and Apollonia, and on to Thessalonica and Berea where there are significant synagogues. He stays in each of

these places for three weeks justifying the ministry of Jesus to his Jewish audience and evangelizing to the polytheistic Greeks. Luke, the author of this campaign memoir, does his best to present Paul's efforts as a success, but it's clear that Paul's reception is not overwhelmingly positive. "Now some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas...and "thus many of them believed, including highly respected Greek women and not just a few Jewish men." One of the curiosities about these accounts of Paul's preaching is the receptivity of so many women. Luke mentions women twice among those who hear Paul's testimony and join with him, and of course we know that women frequently had leading roles as prophets and apostles in the early church. Among those that Luke calls "high-born and open-minded" enough to hear the gospel," he seems to be counting women in numbers perhaps more significant than the men.

Today following worship we hear from Rev. Katey Zeh, who is the executive director of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Our hope that Katey would visit with us sometime this year preceded news of the draft Supreme Court opinion threatening the Roe precedent, but of course our conversation is especially important in light of growing concerns about reproductive health and rights to privacy. Katey Zeh writes from a pro-choice perspective. She leads an organization that seeks through prophetic public witness, advocacy, and education to advance reproductive health and freedom for women. Her organization is one that our partners in the United Church of Christ have encouraged us to support given the likely outcome of the Alito opinion.

The Apostle Paul may seem like such an unlikely scripture from which to sit in today's conversation. All I can say is that it is the season of Easter and we are called to read the scriptures as they are appointed. And I believe that the Gospel is saying something to each one of us when it proclaims that the love of Christ disarms us of our unacknowledged assumptions about others, when it dispossesses

us of our claims to purity, when it insists that we be in covenant community with others who see things differently. The defining challenge of the early church was to live together in covenant and to listen earnestly. So as we approach today's conversation, Katey Zeh's visit is an opportunity for us to ask ourselves. What do I have to let go of in order to live more fully into the love of Christ? Surely in the midst of this covenant community we have many different personal experiences, identities, and lenses of perspective on the needs of women and children. So let us listen to Katey and to each other with a heart for the covenant that we share more than the opinions that we hold.