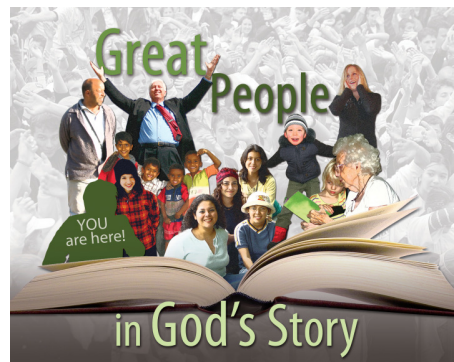


**THE MESSAGE for May 29, 2011**  
**Acts 17:16-17, 22-34**  
*Paul... Planting Seeds of Faith*  
**The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

Today we begin a new worship series entitled “Great People in God’s Story.” The Bible is filled with seemingly great people. In reality they are ordinary people through whom God does extraordinary things to carry out God’s kingdom work on earth.



Throughout the summer we will look at the failures and successes of people in the Bible – gaining insight for our own faith journey. I hope you will be inspired by their lives and take a bold step of faith – seeing yourself in this picture of God’s story.

We begin with one of my favorite people in the Bible, Paul. No other individual, apart from Jesus, has shaped the Christian faith more than Paul. He was the first known missionary. He is credited with 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament – 30% of the New Testament comes from Paul. He planted numerous churches in the first century. His is a remarkable faith journey.

Paul was born in the city of Tarsus, in present-day Turkey. His birth name was Saul. But it was changed from the Jewish name (Saul) to a non-Jewish equivalent (Paul)... Not sure exactly *why* his name was changed but we know *when* it happened. It happened after a transforming encounter with Jesus. After a conversion experience, God often changes people’s names: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel ... Saul to Paul.

As a young man, Paul traveled to Jerusalem to be trained as a Pharisee. Pharisee literally means “separated ones.” The Pharisees were a small but very influential religious group committed to strictly obeying the Jewish laws and traditions. They saw it as their calling to please God with absolute obedience – preserving and protecting their traditions – enforcing them at all costs within the community.

Paul studied with a famous rabbi named Gamaliel (gah-may’lee-uhl), which tells us something very important about Paul. He was head of the class. He was a very bright man. In the ancient-world this would have been equivalent of earning your Ph.D. at Harvard.

Paul was zealous about his work as a Pharisee – preserving and protecting the traditions. He first appears in Acts 8, during the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Listen to how Paul - this hero of the Christian faith - is introduced (Acts 8:1-3)

*“And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.”*

It would take an act of God to transform a guy like that into a disciple of Jesus. And that’s exactly what God does. In Acts 9, we’re told that Paul is on his way to the ancient city of Damascus. He has a list of names of everyone who is believed to be practicing the way, following Jesus. Paul has a list of names in hand and is going to round up those Christians in Damascus. And on the way he is blinded by a light – literally blinded. He has a conversation with the Lord. There are people around him but they don’t hear the conversation. He is told to go into Damascus, meet up with the disciples, and he would be healed. And he is. His sight restored physically and spiritually. And his life is forever changed.

The zealous energy he used to persecute the church was now used to grow the church. In partnership with others, Paul takes three major missionary journeys in his lifetime. And we’re not talking about going on an airplane or in a car. He traveled thousands of miles on foot, horseback, and by sailboat.

He preaches the Gospel, plants new churches, and mentors new leaders. All for the sake of growing people – not killing people but growing people in their relationship with Jesus. He writes letters to those churches and their leaders to support, teach, correct and encourage them. We have parts of those letters today:

- Romans,
- 1st and 2nd Corinthians,
- Galatians,
- Philippians,
- 1st and 2nd Timothy

Paul’s ministry was remarkably productive and remarkably challenging. Paul encountered many hardships along the way. But those hardships don’t deter him but rather compel him all the more to do the work he felt called to do. Listen to what Paul has suffered for the sake of helping more people live the faith.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 *“Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.”*

I don't know about you but I read about these hardships from Paul it makes me feel like a spiritual wimp, when I consider what Paul suffered for the faith. I mean when somebody takes issue with my leadership, which often happens, I think... "Now why are they persecuting me?" I can almost hear Paul say - "Persecute - Yeah right!?!? You don't know what persecution is, Rob." And he would be right. I don't. We don't. We have it so good in this country, don't we? We have the freedom to live the faith however we wish. We have the freedom to exercise our religion without any kind of persecution like Paul is talking about. We have it so good.

And that's because on this Memorial Day Weekend we remember that there were men and women willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the freedom we share in this country. They have made the ultimate sacrifice dying so that we might live. It's appropriate then for us during this time of worship to take a moment of silence as we bow our heads and close our eyes to give thanks to the service men and women who make our lives possible in this country. Let us do so now...

*(moment of silence)* Let us pray... Almighty God, we have so many men and women over the years who were committed to our freedom in this place and around the world. We pause to give them thanks this Memorial Day Weekend for their ultimate sacrifice as we recall their acts of love and mercy for our sake. This we pray giving thanks for their lives among us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Paul was so committed to Christ Jesus that he was willing to die in faith for others to live in faith. We don't know how Paul died. The Bible doesn't tell us. The Book of Acts ends with him under house arrest in Rome. Most likely he was killed by Nero.

Today's reading from Acts 17 is a classic picture of Paul in action. He enters the city of Athens, a place full of idol worship, where philosophers and spiritual seekers from around the ancient world gathered to exchange ideas. The text tells us that Paul is "deeply distressed" as he waits for Timothy and Silas to join him there.

Paul is troubled because he can see how people were blatantly disregarding God's commandment against idol worship. Paul sees the people trying to satisfy their spiritual hunger with idols – things made of wood or stone. The people were looking for God in all the wrong places, Paul realizes. He has found the living God in a relationship with Christ Jesus, and he longs for others to have that same life-changing experience too.

*(Read Acts 17:16-34)*

Point is... Paul had a passion to share Jesus with others and nothing was going to stop him. Paul understood his audience, and so he meets the people right where they are. He doesn't condemn them for their idol worship. Instead, he praises them for their spiritual hunger. Paul even quotes one of their poets.

Paul never shied away from the truth about Jesus. He never shied away from sharing what Jesus had done in his life. He never shied away from trying to create that

environment by planting seeds of faith for others to experience that transforming life in Christ as well. Oddly enough, not everyone liked or accepted what Paul has to say, but he knows it isn't his responsibility to change anyone. That is God's job. Paul simply planted the seeds of faith and created that environment for faith to grow.

Paul had a passion that seemed to be motivated by at least these two things: **gratitude** and **grace**

### **Gratitude.**

Paul's life is reflected in his gratitude for all that God has done for him. Paul didn't deserve God's grace or love or forgiveness. In fact, Paul refers to himself as the worst of sinners reflecting back to the days when he was a persecutor of the church - breathing threats and murder against Christians. Paul is so grateful for God's gift of grace poured out for him through the cross of Christ.

For Paul a life of faith is never a duty or an obligation. It is a privilege. It's a privilege to be called to live the faith. I am convinced that God does not call the qualified. God qualifies the called. That brings us to grace.

### **Grace.**

Paul is also motivated by his personal experience of God's transforming grace in his life. Paul had a life-changing experience when he met Jesus and he wants others to experience that too. I know this happens in people's lives today. It's not just something we read about in the Bible. There may not be a flash of lightening like it was for Paul but it does happen.

I met a guy this past week. We'll call him George because that's his name. George grew up in a very strict evangelical family. Being "Born Again" was expected. And as he tells it he tried to force that to happen 4 different times. He told me he was born again four times "But not really," he said. He walked away from church as teenager until he met the girl of his dreams. God has a way of working through other people in our lives. She invited him to come to worship in a Lutheran church. "It was nothing like his childhood church where guilt and repentance was driven into your head." Legalism - he called it. He struggled with our Lutheran confession until one day sitting in worship with his girlfriend he thought, "Is this all there is? Is faith this simple?" And he said he heard a voice from over here - outside his head saying, "Yes, it's that simple. Faith is that simple. Believe what Jesus has done for you on the cross." George said that moment changed his life and his journey of faith began. Worship takes on a whole new place in his life and so too does Jesus.

I debated about going here with you this morning but I decided I would. I was not seminary material. I was not college material. If I got a "C" in high school I was lucky. I got through High School by the skin of my nose. I don't think I ever took a book home. I couldn't wait to get out of school.

Well, God had other plans. I squeaked by Trade School for Auto Mechanics & Auto Body. I squeaked by college – taking all these remedial and special courses to get me up to where I should have been. I enter seminary and was told in the first semester, “Rob, you probably should not go back to seminary after the first semester because you are going to fail out.” Those were the words that still ring through my head from the test we all take to see if we qualify.

I remember going back to seminary that first semester thinking, “You know what I think God made a mistake, I don’t belong here. They’re right.” I was sitting in the chapel having a heart-to-heart with God. And in the chapel about 10:00 that night, there were two spot lights on the side of the walls focused on the cross of Christ right in the middle of the chancel with the resurrected Jesus coming off the cross. I was there probably a good hour and I remember saying, “God you made a mistake. Tomorrow I’m out of here. I’m packing my bags and I’m leaving seminary.” When I got up I turned to go out the back door of the chapel, it was pitch dark. And it was as if God said to me, “Rob, if you walk out those doors you will spend the rest of your life in the dark.” I turned and looked back at the cross with the only lights in the room focused on the cross and it was as if Jesus said, “Rob, follow me, I need you, and with me you will always be in the light.”

Folks that moment changed my life forever. I went back to my room. I studied my tail off. That was God at work compelling me, qualifying the unqualified, to be standing here as your spiritual leader today. It’s not what I do. It’s what God is doing through me.

God continues to offer personal experiences of God’s transforming grace that changes our lives. An encounter with the holy is bound to change us. It might happen in worship or in a LIFE Group. It might happen when working with the youth or nursery or in children’s church. It might happen on your way home from worship today as you reflect on your experience here this morning. It might happen on a mission trip to El Salvador or to Tennessee to help clean up after a natural disaster. It might happen in quiet time while reading God’s story book - the Bible.

Have you experienced God’s transforming grace in your life? I hope you are open to it. I hope you are looking for it because it is happening right here in our midst.

Paul was an ordinary guy who did some extraordinary things – not because he was extraordinary but because the God we worship is extraordinary. God chooses to use ordinary people, flawed people just like you and me, to do God’s amazing work in the world. Paul didn’t try to change people. He saw that as God’s job. Paul’s job was to live the faith, planting seeds of faith in others and creating the right environment for those seeds to grow and produce. Paul was motivated by gratitude and grace.

What motivates you? Believe this – you have a place in God’s great story.  
Amen.