

Paul in Rome, the Kingdom of God, and Juneteenth

We've skipped over quite a few chapters of Acts this week – 11 to be precise. There are some good stories in those chapters.

They tell what gets to be a familiar story – Paul travels the Roman Empire sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. He gets beat up and thrown in jail by Jews and Gentiles alike. But in all those places, his words have an impact on at least some people and they become believers.

Once he has a little group of believers, he helps them establish a church. He stays awhile to help get them going and then, he moves on to the next place.

A group of Jews has taken considerable offense at him and began following him around and trying to turn people against him.

Finally, he makes his way back to Jerusalem. But this troublesome group goes there too. You can see from Paul's tale here what happens.

After Jerusalem, the next several chapters are about his journey to Rome. As a Roman citizen, he can appeal his case to Caesar.

The journey is a tough one...there are shipwrecks, snake bites, as well as the usual discomforts and dangers of travel in the ancient world.

The chapters we have not covered are worth a read...and Acts is probably one of the most readable books of the New Testament. I'd suggest reading them. I just couldn't find much new to preach on in them.

We don't know the exact years Paul was in Rome, but based on the likely dates of his various letters, it was probably somewhere between the late 50's AD to the early 60's.

This would have been during the reign of Emperor Nero. Nero was a vicious persecutor of Christians. It's widely believed that Paul was eventually executed in Rome, probably by beheading, but we don't really know.

What we do know is that Rome was a pretty dicey place for Christians. And we know that the Jewish people were pretty happy keeping some distance from the Christians, because things hadn't always gone well for them with Nero either. They've heard so many people speak against this Christian sect. Many of them are understandably not eager to jump on a train that could get them killed.

Frustrated, Paul responds to their reluctance with the words of their own prophet, Isaiah...you refuse to listen, you refuse to open your eyes, you refuse to accept the healing that God wants for you.

Now, God has sent this healing and salvation to the Gentiles, Paul says. They will listen.

Among others, this passage has been used to justify anti-Semitism. Lots of havoc and pain have been unleashed over the years when Christians use the Bible to be anti-any group of people. That's a habit that should have long ago been ended.

Plus, by this time, Paul has had ample proof that not all the Gentiles will listen either.

This whole exchange invites us to ask ourselves, how well have we Gentiles listened?

So, what is it that keeps getting Paul into so much trouble?

We talked about resurrection being a difficult sell – the Athenians Paul preached to were skeptical because of that.

But what got Paul in trouble with authorities is basically all the same things that got Jesus killed. It was this kingdom of God talk...a kind of kingdom very different from typical Roman and Jewish power structures. And Paul lived that different kind of a kingdom in the churches he started.

The very earliest churches were very egalitarian communities with rich and poor both able to hold leadership positions. They were communities where women held leadership positions and helped start churches.

In fact Paul would write in one of his earliest letters to the Galatians, no longer is there Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female. In Christ we are a new creation.

He didn't mean that differences were eliminated. But in the earliest churches, hierarchies based on those differences appeared to be eliminated to a remarkable extent.

That was the church modeling God's new creation...it was a church modeling the kingdom of God. But those who benefitted from the power structure as it had always been often resisted that. As the years went on, that became true in the church as well.

Honestly, it's the same issue the prophets, like Isaiah, spoke against. A world that favored the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and oppressed was not the world God desired. That's what God wanted to heal.

That's what Jesus came to heal. The powers that be didn't want it healed. They still often don't.

What would it look like for us to let God heal the wounds in our own time and place?

This is an especially good question for us to ask ourselves this week. Yesterday was Juneteenth. It marks the date in 1865 when Union soldiers announced the end of slavery to enslaved people in Texas, two and a half years after the Emancipation proclamation.

And Thursday was the 6th Anniversary of the shooting deaths of the Emmanuel 9, shot during a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. They were shot by a young white supremacist eager to start a race war.

That young white supremacist grew up in our church denomination and was still listed on the rolls of an ELCA church at the time of the murders.

What causes someone to be radicalized in such a way is complex and I don't want to oversimplify it.

But clearly growing up in the Lutheran church didn't prevent it. And the question is, did he ever hear in his church that white supremacy wasn't what God wanted?

It's quite possible he did not. The Christian church in this country has a very poor track record where racism and white supremacy are concerned.

The church in many places actively supported slavery and Jim Crow. Many of our polite white midwestern churches just simply never mentioned it.

Christianity in this country has become so invested in a very privatized faith that's only about my forgiveness so I can go to heaven. We've forgotten that Jesus came to preach good news to the poor and the outcast and the oppressed.

Jesus envisioned a new kingdom...the kingdom of God...a place where the mighty would be brought down a notch and the lowly lifted up.

This Kingdom of God...the one Paul is preaching here...is a loaded political term. It was for the Romans. It should be for us...but too often the church tries to tame it.

So there's probably a few different reactions out there to what I'm saying. Some are all in. Others aren't sure. Why do we need to hear this? We weren't responsible for slavery or Jim Crow.

I'm not racist, why do we keep talking about this?

I've no doubt that all of us would say that the Kingdom of God is incompatible with white supremacy. And by white supremacy I don't mean a fringe group. I mean a whole system that has long favored white people. But unless we find ways to be actively against it, we are contributing to the problem.

You can't look at the inequality between white people and Black and Brown people and think that's what Jesus intended for the kingdom of God.

And I don't think he meant we should just wait for God to put it all right in some future heaven. Jesus taught a whole lot more about how we're to live here and now than he did about heaven. We are called to do this kingdom work in the here and now, even when we don't really know where to start or how we possibly can.

I think we can begin with the question I asked earlier....when God heals us where the sin of racism is concerned, what will that look like?

It will look like health care outcomes and life expectancy between people of color and white people that are the same.

It will look like black neighborhoods with good schools, neighborhood businesses, and levels of wealth and home ownership as a group that are the same as white neighborhoods.

It will look like a prison system whose population isn't 40% people of color in a state where less than 15% of the population is.

It will look like the dignity and even existence of Native Americans is upheld and their ties to this land respected. It will look like the devastating poverty rates on reservations and the disappearance of native women are taken seriously.

It will look like people who are brave enough to look at the inequality, and say hmmm....either I'm going to have to say there's something deficient in black and brown people as a whole, which is blatantly racist.

Or I'm going to need to learn what it is about the structures and policies in our society that contribute to this. And figure out what I can do about it in my little pocket of the world.

That will be scary. We will worry about what people will think. We'll worry about what we might lose in the process of that healing.

But here's what we can trust...the kind of society built even in part on racism isn't good for white people either.

When we pray and trust God to guide us and lead us in this healing, we can also trust that healing that ugly part of our society will bring life and shalom to all God's people, including us.