

**Sermon: “In the footsteps of Paul”
Community Presbyterian Church
Aug 5, 2007**

I promised Sylvia I would preach this morning back in May before we left on a journey of 6 weeks, and she reminded me at least twice while we were traveling. I guess it was those email messages first in Turkey and later in Greece which served to do more than remind me. In fact she was framing what I wish to say by suggesting somehow that the travel we were making was somehow like her own, where the purpose of traveling seems to return and tell about it.

Moreover, the first week back, Chi Chi asked me several questions about what we saw on the way, especially about the town of Ephesus (EPHES in Turkey today). I told him that I had an illegal stone, brought back from the ancient city. So let me start by saying that to have the stone is not a proof that I was there. Nor is the stone one that Paul would have walked on...but did imagine the time Paul spent in Ephesus seemed to inspire him and in a very small way our own inspiration. Paul was there for two whole years, starting an important church when he visited the city in his third missionary journey and he wrote the first letter to the Corinthians whose church he help found on the second missionary journey. He may have written the letter to Titus while in Corinth. Later he wrote a letter to the Ephesians, some fragments of which probably comprise the canonical letter of the same name, although my colleague Jim Hester would perhaps challenge that statement. Much of what we know about Paul in Ephesus comes from what Luke wrote in the Book of Acts of the Apostles, 19.

We were there only for a morning, I must say, and I can hardly claim any expertise for so short a stay. We did not even take the time to visit the house of Jesus’ mother, Mary, which

I learned that the last Pope on a visit to Ephesus, declared “was probably the right house.”

But standing for a moment in the Agora, I had a sense of an echo of the encounter that Paul had there, and I even imagined him speaking on the small of the two theaters that have been preserved there. Moreover, I felt when we walked down the marble steps to what would be later the Library of Celsus, I imagined him going in the Library. But I was wrong for the library was not built for a generation after Paul was there. But the remains of the buildings devoted to the ancient Greek and by then Roman gods and goddess, like Nike (the goddess of Victory) were probably there and Paul may have had a view of them that I also felt. The preaching of Paul would likely have led him to declare Jesus so much more important than these goddesses that I could smile for the church that Jesus has a billion believers in the world, and Nike is only the name brand for some running shoes...

(Forgive my arrogance) But I was clearly viewing the ancient city from the perspective of two thousand years of ups and downs in Western Civilization, which has made the stopover of thousands of tourists every day as one of the most important places to visit, along with Jerusalem and Rome. In fact, Helen and I once visited a prison cell in Rome which was the last place Paul slept and we had been taken to a place in Athens, where Paul preached about an “Unknown God” he had seen honored in Athens (and about which I also preached here two years ago when we had just returned from another journey.

In sharp contrast to my feelings two years ago, this year I felt the power of Paul, the inspiration which his life and writings made on me. Ephesus seemed more impressive for the journey there had taken us 7 years, when once we could not get there from where we were staying in Samos and I bought the tourist book and it took us a week of traveling through Istanbul, two days on a bus, and then because 4 cruise ships arrived one

morning we were told DONT go to Ephesus today. 50 buses loads from just one ship pulled out of a parking lot just across from our hotel, so we waited one more day....

I wanted to walk the mile up to the city the way Paul would have done but my fellow travelers and a fast talking taxi man took up to the top of what would be only a half mile walk down the hill through the theatres and monuments to the Greek and Roman gods...

But what can one find? Only what one brings to the experience. Flashbacks of times in churches hearing about Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus....a month in high school when I took a Bible course and we drew in red, green, blue and black the 4 missionary journeys of Paul, in which now Ephesus seems the central point of it all, the place he stayed the longest of any journey. the place to which he would return, and now the chance to read the Corinthian letter knowing it was written somewhere in that town...and that he would write something to the Ephesians, when his life was coming to an end, perhaps the very words (if in Greek) that I tried to explain in my own doctoral dissertation...and which I have also tried to teach students about in the last 40 years....it was of those marble steps were a point of connection to Biblical times that I needed to inspire the rest of my walk for the next years of life.

To go there this year was like a dream deferred until at time when I needed a cane to hold up my stumbling steps down that way...until I knew more about the struggles Paul would encounter to share his beliefs with others...until a time when our own world would be in chaos and confusion, when we too might be in danger from travels in that part of the world, not so much for our religious beliefs but because the hatred that some folks feel toward Americas for our folly in engaging in armed conflict so close to Turkey that the whole nation is moving toward a more

hostile stance toward the West, where we are know as “crusaders” and inspired by Satan

I shall, I hope, be able to remember this journey for my whole life to continue to read and think about what we saw that day. That is the way trips often are for me. They are events which I do not understand at the time, but later in reading, remembering, writing about them, they can take on a very different, and I trust deeper view.

I try to read some ancient Greek each year in Greece, and since we had just walked the main street of Ephesus, I read Luke’s account of Paul in Ephesus. When we were there, I said somehow felt Paul’s presence, but I felt it in the Agora, the public place where the men mostly went to sit and talk or do some business. Later reading Luke, I noticed that first Paul spoke in the Jewish synagogue there for three months. But my guidebook did not give a location for the synagogue, although one might see it in some future years, for the excavations are not yet finished. In any case, Luke wrote that after 3 months, some of the Jewish Ephesians were “stubborn and “disbelieving” (ηπειθουν epeithoun) and “speaking evil of the way” (κακολογουντες την οδον). So Paul withdrew and took disciples from them and went to the “hall of Tyrannos” (στολη Τυραννου).

When in Ephesus we did not see that hall either. It may be dug up, but it was so located that many come hear him, now both Jews and Greeks...indeed “all the residents of Asia, Asia is the name of the Roman Province that Ephesus was the capital of that province.

Later I found it curious that Luke does not record any sermons that Paul gave in Ephesus, but instead records the miracles and the was “diseases left” the people who were healed. I found it interesting that those who watched the healing by Paul tried to heal themselves “I adjure you by the Jesus who Paul

preaches...” It did not work, for the evil spirit, which was infecting the diseased, could speak and said “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?”

(τον Ιησουν γινωσκω και τον Παυλον επισταμας; υμεις δε τινες εστε?) I

I laughed out loud when I read that line. But a little later in the chapter, Luke recorded a problem with a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made images of Artemis, and he told his fellows that Paul had persuaded a lot of people that these gods we make not gods at all, and even the temple of the great goddess Artemis may not count for much....”

Actually many of the people had come to Ephesus in Paul’s time to worship in the Temple of ‘Artemis which had been a part of Ephesus life since 800 BC. Artemis in Greek mythology was the sister of Apollo and the daughter of Leto and Zeus. Her Roman name was Diana (maybe you will think of Princess Diana who died ten years ago, not a bad link, for she has become a kind of goddess of the hunt (photographers) and of fecundity, having produced the future kings of England.) She had animals sacred to her followers. Such as the stag, the boar, the rabbit, the wolf, even birds and fishes (Beare, F. W. “Artemis,” *IDB*, 242). And in Ephesus she was worshipped for fertility. Probably in Ephesus her slaves, were NOT prostitutes, but they were in most of the other Greek cities, where she was worshipped.

In her temple in Ephesus there was a part of meteorite (Acts 19:35, “the sacred stone that fell from the sky.”

This Demetrius caused such a ruckus that Paul had to be hidden for a while and not make public appearances, therefore in danger during a riot, even fear of murder, Paul went to Macedonia and back to Corinth.

Some scholars believe that it was in Ephesus that Paul wrote some of his letters to the Corinthians, perhaps the first part of I Corinthians, so if one were inclined the content of Paul’s preaching during the Ephesus years (perhaps some say more like

three years than the two Luke noted) were in fact what he was writing to the Corinthians, whose church he had founded in the Second Journey.

At this point I added to my research on Paul in the Book of Acts, of a book review by Richard Eder of Christopher Woodward “In Ruins” New York Times Oct 2, 2002) which Helen kindly gave and enriched the understanding of what I, and she, and now you are involved in. That is, by fascination with ancient ruins in Turkey, Israel, Italy, and also anywhere in the world, we are somehow in pursuit of ourselves. We are looking for the forces and events which have made us who we are. Woodward put it “When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future. To statesmen, ruins predict the fall of empires and to philosophers the futility of mortal man’s aspirations. To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of time; to a painter or architect, the fragments of a stupendous antiquity call into question the purpose of their art.”

What would you, my dear friends, leave in the ground to have future generations find out about you, or our moment in life 2007, for example. Soon America will be only something to read about in a history book, even though there will hopefully be a land mass of that name when the country we call the USA is gone. We are doomed as sure as was Ephesus. Hopefully our escape in Iraq will not advance our doom into our own lives, but another such folly just might end our nation, at least in this last 50 years of glory. I think that something of what St. Paul went to Ephesus will survive “America.” That something is, I believe, Christianity. In some form, perhaps a better form than the “mega-church” which like Walmarts in the shopping mall category seems to take delight in gobbling up the smaller stores (churches) but some form of commerce for the exchange of goods will replace the ruins of Walmart stores, just as some form of Christianity may be the successor in the 21st or 22nd

century of Christianity. What that form may be is no more clear to me than what St. Paul went to Ephesus to teach...But let's leave Paul.

We are now in a transition to the next section of this sermon Next the July 30, 2007 of the *New Yorker* fell into my hands last Monday with the cover of three women, in various forms of dress and inside was a report by Ian Parker about Bonobos as peace-loving, matriarchal, and sexually liberated Primates.

I did not know until this week what a Bonobo was. So to give some sense of other reading that the Scriptures, which I gave Trisha a week or so ago, I must include this brief report. It is not quite so moving as the "Star trower" from the sermon last week by Jan.

But it does have its origin in respect for other living beings, and in this case what we can learn from them. The students of primate behavior observed in captivity in the San Diego Zoo, for example that the Bonobos there do not seem aggressive like other primates (including humans who usually live outside zoos. They do not usually fight for their food, and the females seem to be in control wrote Susan Blockwho promotes the Bonobo way on public television in Los Angeles. "Plesure eases pain; good sex diffuses tension; lovfe lessens violence, you can not very will fight when you are making love (she uses Orgasm (Parker, I.

"Swingers: NewYorker, July 30, 2007) The point of the article seems to suggest that somewhere back in pre0historical times our ancestors and the Bonobos shared a common lineage on the evolutionary swing out of Africa and into other parts of this planet. Somehow we humans seem to have gone wrong with aggressive behavior and lost the pattern of peacemaking, lovemaking...and spent most of our energy making wars.

What then or how then we might learn from these friendly distant cousins of ours who maintain their hideoutss in the

Democratic Republic of Congo near Lui Kotal on a tributary of the Kasai River, which is very, very difficult to get to. But our correspondent went there with a German, Gottfried Hohmann, who was about 30 in the 1980s when he became interested in these tongue kissing apes...and has studied them ever since. Finally, the author reports from his own observations if with Hohmann who led him there to see if the bonobos in the wild are as peaceful as those in the San Diego Zoo. Was the common ancestor shared by humans, chips and bonobos- “Bonobo-like, As Hohmann suspects? Did the ancestral forest environment select for male docility and did Homo(Human) and the chimpanzees then both dump that behavior, independently as they evolved in less bountiful environments? The modern bonobo holds the answer, Hohmann said; in time its behavior will start to illuminate such characteristics as relationships between men and women, the purpose of aggression and the costs and benefits of male bonding,” (Parker, .60 photos of bonobos can be seen in New Yorker. Com)”

Now for the third and last part of this sermon, I chose selections from Ephesians 5. Although the letter to the Ephesians contains the name of Paul, most scholars today (including my good friend Jim Hester, who corrected me long ago, thinking I did not know the issues here over the letter’s authorship) would hold that the differences between this and the “authentic” letters of Paul, were over the tone, the content and the focus of the letter.

Beare (St .Paul and his Letters, 111) offers the idea that the letter was really a step in the process of canonization of Paul’s letters, as they were for the first time collected into a collection we call the Epistles of Paul, with the Letter to the Ephesians being the kind of introduction to Paul’s thought which linked the letters, some written from Ephesus, others from prisons where he was confined, and by the amazing bishop of Ephesus who bore the name “Onesimus,” a slave probably

freed as a result of Paul's letter to Philemon, to whom Paul sent Onesimus back, and so the letter to the Ephesians could be "a tribute to the memory of the man who had brought him to Christ (Paul) he had grown to be a disciple who had come to understand Paul's teachings) with the passage of the years, from the 50's when Paul was in Ephesus, until 30 years later in the 80's when the church was well established and he had become a bishop there. The fact that Onesimus was the bishop is first found in the second century letter of Ignatius of Antioch who gave a glowing description of Onesimus leadership. Lyman ("Onesimus" IDB, 602) observed that Onesimus was a name more likely to be for a slave than for a free man, and that he would have been about 70 years old, "a not unsuitable age for a bishop, who had proved himself by his commendable service. "

Some years ago I wrote a chapter in a book about Ephesians 5, so I got it out again this year, and I also just wrote a 400 page book about weddings. This is a wedding sermon, given in the Letter to the Ephesians, who had settled down for the "long haul."

Here we are at the point in this homily where the implications are to be spelled out of what we are to do about the foregoing, and to apply things to our lives. Both Sylvia and Jan are far better than most preachers in these notations of implications or the "What do we do now? –part of their sermons.

I think the folks in Ephesus some fifty years after Jesus death and resurrection were not expecting that there would be a "day of rapture" or that they would be taken from their donkey carts into the hereafter. Their roles would be to stay on this earth and teach others how to live and to believe. Indeed we read in Ephesians 5, (as it would be divided up in the Middle Ages, so scholars could cite chapter and verses) "be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ love us and

give himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” That is a very Pauline notion, if with a new sense of fragrance....

The author of the letter says something I have only heard once in the 100 weddings I wrote about: “wives are subject to your husbands, as to the Lord..... (5:21)

But then he wrote “husbands love your wives, as Christ love the church and give himself up for her (notice how the “church” had come to be established by the time the Letter was written) Which is harder to do you think... To love or to be subject to another?

I found it helpful to interpret what is said here in this wedding sermon as if it were an early Christian “wedding ceremony. The author wrote Christ” has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.” (Eph. 2:14) That assertion is a crucial one to the understanding of Paul in the other letters.

“Bornkam G. (1974 Paul 238) asserts that the author of Ephesians had a much truer estimate of what the Pauline gospel was trying to do.” In breaking down the wall of hostility then love was possible between God and man. It was also possible that love breaks down all hostility between the nuptial pair being addressed in what is in Chapter 5...

Then the author of the letter quotes the line from Genesis (2:24) which I also recently wrote about in the selection “the wedding of Adam and Eve.” There we read that a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one....This the author says is a great mystery.....and how!