

Confident in Christ, Acts 23:6-11
Pastor Judy Bangsund
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Out of the frying pan, into the fire: that's the Apostle Paul. As most of you know, our summer reading as a congregation has been the book of Acts. Now, as we move into August, we are nearing the end of the book-- we are on the 11th installment, out of 13. Paul has faced increasing opposition from his enemies – both from the Jewish community within and also from the Roman government without – and now he finds himself, once more, under arrest. He has been jailed many times, but now it's serious. He faces a series of trials which will result in a life or death sentence. Today and next week we will be watching Paul defend his faith, first before the Jews and then before the Romans.

Although he is in deep tapioca, Paul remains remarkably unruffled. We have seen that wherever Paul goes, he seems to be a magnet for trouble. Riots seem to just spring up all around him; the air is tense; people get upset. We have read that Paul was warned not to go to Jerusalem, because he would be bound and handed over to the authorities. Nevertheless, Paul stays the course because that's where the Holy Spirit leads him. Where does Paul get his confidence?

Paul was one of the greatest missionaries ever known, if not the greatest. But, while he often ran into trouble, he never lost his confidence in Christ. He had courage because of two particular promises Jesus made to him – first, that he must testify in Rome. (At least he's going to get that far). And ultimately, Jesus has promised resurrection: the hope of eternal life.

Paul was a great missionary, and we have said that what is descriptive for Paul is prescriptive for us. So, if Paul was a missionary, does that mean we have to be missionaries too? I have used the word "missionary" several times -- in the pulpit, in the newsletter and elsewhere. And when I do, I get several reactions. First, a certain distance. Distance, not because it isn't important, but because some people think, "That's not for me. It's for other people. I'm not a missionary." Another reaction is fear. Some people hear the word "missionary" and find themselves startled, like deer caught in the headlights. "Who, me? A missionary? You mean, like, knocking on doors or bringing a Bible to Starbucks? Awkward!" The thought can be scary. *Not sure I can do that.* And the third reaction is excitement: "Can I be one, too? When do we go?" These are the people who have just come back from Mexico, for example; they are pumped. "I'm in!" And let me just say, I get all three reactions. No judgements.

So I want to neutralize the word "missionary." The word itself comes with a lot of baggage, a lot of unintended expectations. Let's wipe the slate clean. A missionary is not just someone who goes overseas or across the border. A missionary can be (and often is!) a person who lives at home in a normal neighborhood, has a normal job, *and* who knows Jesus. A missionary is simply a person who has a mission, a person who has something to do that God wants done. That's it. It's in the DNA of every person who believes in Jesus, *every* person who has been grasped by the incredibly good news that, in Christ, they are now forgiven, that God has given them new hope; people who are now transformed by that hope. Ordinary people, like you and me. You are a missionary.

Today we're talking about confidence – confidence to share your faith. The same confidence Paul had to stand trial, to defend the Gospel, come what may. How can *you* find that confidence in Christ? So that *you* can be a person who does not fear what others fear; who is not afraid of what to say. Rather, you can be a person confident that Jesus is present and the Holy Spirit is in the driver's seat. You, too, can be centered on the hope of the resurrection. You, too, can have the confidence that is available to every believer. So, let's take a look at our text for today. There's a lot of common sense and simple strategy in Paul's defense.

Note, first of all, that Paul knew his audience. He understood the people he was addressing. And he identified himself with them. To the Jewish crowd, he identified himself as a Jew. To the Jewish leaders, he identified himself as a Jewish leader. To the Romans, he identified himself as a Roman citizen. Paul knew his audience, he identified himself with them; he used language they understood. So, first: know your audience. Get to know them, if you don't already.

Second, he had a plan – flexible enough to work in any circumstance. You remember that in Athens, a place where there were many gods, he told them about the “unknown god” that some of them worshiped. Rather than chastise them for idol worship, he used the opportunity to tell them about something better: to tell them about the God they didn't yet know. In other places, Paul would tell his story. About how Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, or about his travels and the people he had met, or about the difficulties he had endured. He told his own story. In our reading today, when the air was tense and his audience on edge, he made one single, clear statement of his hope in the resurrection. Paul connected with his audience in authentic ways. It's a simple plan. Connect in authentic ways.

And third, Paul trusted God. Now, Paul ran into a lot of trouble -- and this did not surprise him. He was a realist. By this time, Christianity had become unpopular with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They were protective of their territory. They did not want to lose their Law or their Temple. They were afraid of the Romans, who might smell danger and cause them trouble. So Paul expected opposition. But he never lost confidence. He continued to trust that the Holy Spirit was leading him. He put his hope in Christ. He staked his life on it. Trust God. Know your audience; have a plan; trust God.

As followers of Jesus, we are really in the same boat Paul was in 2000 years ago. Christianity has lost its popularity in our world today; many people are wary of any religious talk, and Christian-talk in particular. They don't want to be evangelized; they don't want to be institutionalized (as in, church). This is nothing new. Back in the 17th century Blaise Pascal said,

Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.

Pascal wrote some 500 years ago, but it still rings true today.

So -- in our religion-weary world -- how can we get a fair hearing for the Gospel? Again, we look to Paul, and employ the same principles we found in our readings for today. Know your audience. Have a plan. Trust God. Let's take a moment to zero in on the *plan*. There are lots of

ways to reach out to others for Christ, but here's a simple strategy that comes from a book by Laurence Singlehurst called *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping: People-Sensitive Evangelism*. I'd like to focus on the "sowing" part – how to sow the seed. How to approach someone for Christ; how to get started. How, basically, to be a missionary in everyday life.

Singlehurst offers three simple steps, beginning with making a connection. Just make a connection. You don't try to dump everything you know about Jesus on the first go-round. You begin by approaching people in a very common-sense, laid-back way, because you already know that people don't want to be "evangelized." They don't want to be a target, and rightly so. (Who wants that?) People want real relationships – they want friends. And that's what God wants for us too – God is all about relationships – with one another and with him.

So the first step is simply, make a connection. You want to get to know your neighbor or a co-worker or the guy sitting next to you on the airplane. You start with name, work, family... find common ground. Identify with him. ("Oh yeah, I've been there...") Be friendly. Listen to him. People generally like to talk about themselves. Don't just *act* interested – that's manipulation – *be* interested.

In this first step, you keep spiritual content to a minimum. If it comes up, be honest about your faith. You want neither to hide nor to hype your faith at this (or at any) point. You aren't playing a game of bait and switch. Your job here is just to open doors. See where the conversation leads. Generally speaking, the message here is simply, "God is good. Christians are normal."

As trust develops, you take the second step. It's a simple matter of developing the friendship you've begun. And, as trust develops, you increase the spiritual content – just a little. Make it personal. Maybe you invite him over for dinner, which you begin (as you usually do) with a simple prayer. Or you comment on a movie you've both seen, bringing up a spiritual insight that grabbed you. Like Paul, you might tell your own story. Just put it out there and see where the conversation goes. If the door closes, let it go and wait until another time. (BTW, it may not be you. That "next time" might fall to another Christian. That's ok; you've made a contribution in planting a little seed.) If the door opens, nudge it a little more. The general message is this: God is good. And he's important in my life.

Trust is the bridge between steps. Let trust develop. Then step three is this: an experience or activity where your friend has direct access to God's presence and power. This might be a Christmas Eve service or our monthly Wednesday night worship. Or Ignite. Or VBS. Or a Bible study or a mission trip. You invite your friend; let him experience it. Let him experience what it feels like to be in God's sphere of influence – and *then* talk about it. Experience first; explain later. The general message is this: God is good and his presence is real. My friends, that's good missionary strategy. Christians are normal; God is important in my life; his presence is real.

That's the sowing part of Sowing, Reaping and Keeping. It's enough for today. It gives you a plan, one that is flexible and useful in many situations.

And here's the bottom line: put your trust in God. If you hear nothing else today, hear this: God is trustworthy. You've all had experiences where you thought you knew somebody really well – maybe someone in your family; perhaps your spouse; or a good friend. You knew them well but they didn't react the way you expected. Or maybe you had a really good plan that you thought was going to work – and then it just didn't pan out. You knew your audience, you had a plan – but it didn't work the way you wanted. And then – God just takes over. He does something you totally didn't expect – all for the better. God is at work! Put your trust in him. You are not in control; he is! He wouldn't have called you into this if he didn't have it all figured out. You can trust him.

Does that mean it's going to be easy? Not necessarily. Probably not! But it does mean that what God wants to accomplish he *will* accomplish. His word will not return to him empty; it will do what he intended – that's what the Bible says. That's why Paul was confident; that's why you can be confident. Know your audience; have a plan – good advice. We see it playing out for Paul. But more than anything else: put your trust in God. It is his power, his presence, his love that will, at the end of the day, cause that seed that you sowed to sprout and grow. That's why you can be confident in Christ. That's what makes all the difference.

Out of the frying pan; into the fire. Paul faced some real difficulties. He knew there would be opposition, and there was. It will be the same for you and me – although I hope you won't start any riots or be imprisoned for your faith. For Paul, the difficulties were real, but his faith was never shaken. By staking his claim on Christ, he found a courage and a confidence born of something much bigger than himself. The same is true for you and me. Whatever the circumstances, you can be confident in Christ. Let's pray.