**[1]** Second Sunday in Lent (Mar 16, 2025) –Second in a three-sermon series
          on the Life and Theology of Paul
Sermon Title:  Paul: Roman Citizen or Jewish Prophet?
Scripture: Romans 13:1-7
Theme: Will the real Paul please stand up?  Citizen of Tarsus or Tribal prophet of Benjamin from Giscalis in Judea?

“Will the real Paul please stand up?” Last week, we engaged with the question of whether Paul was more of a Crusader or more of a Pastor, more of a rabbi? There were arguments to be made on both sides of the discussion. This Sunday, we are engaged with the question of whether Paul was more of a Conforming Citizen or a Disruptive Prophet? Of course, in real life, prophets were and are called to be both hope-tellers and truth-tellers, those called to build-up community as well as sometimes to disrupt it. And citizens are not always conforming; sometimes a good citizen engages in civil disobedience, as when Henry David Thoreau invites Ralph Waldo Emerson to join him in his jail cell. But, this morning, for the purposes of conversation, we are creating some “straw-person” categories: Conforming Citizen of Rome or Disruptive Prophet from Judea.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “citizen” as “a native or naturalized person who owes allegiance to some type of government (country, state or commonwealth) and is entitled to protection from it.” In the city-states of ancient Greece, the term applied mostly to property owners, but NOT to women or slaves, or the poor. The participatory democracy of ancient Greece depended upon “citizens” being courageous in spirit, open to persuasion, discerning as to emotional manipulation at the sound of the human voice, and open to changing their vote in the moment of voting within the confines of the assembly surrounded by other voters. Citizens, residents of the *polis*, were expected to take an active part in the governing of the city-state. If, as a citizen, you did not fulfill your duty in this regard, you might be fined or marked with red paint, or held up to ridicule or dishonor in other ways. In principle, citizens have an obligation, responsibility, or duty to actively participate in, and serve, the community in return for certain privileges, rights or protections. And, in this sense of being a good citizen of the community, being a responsible force for good in it, Paul uses the image of citizenship in his theology as he writes to the church in Philippi.

**[2]** Paul uses a Greek verb that would have a special meaning in the community of Philippi (*politeuomai*): “Conduct yourself as a responsible citizen.” Some people of the time called the city of Philippi by the name of “Little Rome.” The citizens of Philippi were very loyal to Caesar,
patriotic, proud of their service, suspicious of strangers, yet open to skilled persuasion. When Paul says, “Live your everyday life in a manner worthy of the gospel,” he has an edge to his voice that says: “Live out your citizenship in a manner worthy of Christ.” The city spoken of here is the city of God. Another way of putting this is: “Live among the people and institutions of Philippi informed and disciplined by the gospel. Live so that they will know who you are and whose you are, that you belong to Christ and not to Caesar. In this letter, Paul understandably declares that “we are citizens of heaven where the Lord Jesus lives.” (Phil. 3:20), and everyone should know where our ultimate loyalty lies.

One might say that Paul, the conforming citizen, wants people within the community of faith to live their lives as if they are constantly being watched, not only by those who would do harm to the community and the individuals inside it, but also to those who might want to join the community of faith. Paul, in his role as citizen, either within the earthly or heavenly city, is over -obsessed with appearances. Some examples: “Be careful who is watching when you are eating meal previously sacrificed or offered to idols.” (1 Cor. 8:4-10) or “do not take your disputes and disagreements to courts outside the church for resolution. Resolve them among yourselves.” (1 Cor. 6:1-8). In other words, Paul says: “be a good citizen so as not to be noticed.” Paul even puts this in writing: “aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands.” (1 Thess. 4:11). Another example: Control your bodies, do not be lustful. A good citizen does not wrong or exploit his own body or the bodies of others. (1 Thess. 4:5). The body is the holiest part of the Temple, the Greek word ***naos*** means the place inside the temple where God resides. Paul writes: “Do not give the Adversary the occasion to revile us!”

And citizen Paul has harsh words, words that I consider harmful for the community, especially our own communities today, but consider the way in which Paul ends his several warnings: “remember, “this is what some of you used to be,” and perhaps Paul might even extend this to himself, “this is what I used to be,” for in another place he confesses: “I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence (1 Tim. 1:13). Citizen Paul is more concerned with how we treat ourselves and others, **that is** with dignity and respect, and NOT condemning or judging, even as he continues through his lifetime struggling with his own past, his own prejudices, his own internal messages, “doing the things he does not want to do, and not doing the things he should do. (Rms. 7:19). Will the real Paul please stand up?

And, as much as we moderns might cringe at this side of Paul, the citizen-side of Paul, this obsession with appearances leads Paul to suggest that “slaves are to regard their masters as worthy of all honor (1 Tim. 6:1), even though he advocates with Philemon to consider freeing his slave Onesimus (Philemon 8-14). As a citizen, Paul seems to want to work out justice behind the scenes rather than out in front of them. And, in the same way, with his advocacy for women keeping silence in the congregation, NOT teaching or leading,NOT wearing “bling” on their persons, or restricting their lives to childbearing (1 Tim. 2:11-15). Citizen Paul, with all his patriarchal biases, works quite well and successfully behind the scenes with Lydia, a congregational leader in Philippi (Acts 16:9), and partners with Euodia and Syntyche, also in the Philippian congregation, to do the good that the community so very much needs. Will the real Paul please stand up?

The Book of Acts provides a narrative about the Apostle Paul that describes him as a “Roman Citizen.”  This narrative is the primary source of our understanding of Paul as a Roman citizen, born in Tarsus as a citizen, and not one who had purchased his citizenship.

Acts 22:22-29 (See also, Acts 16:37)
“Paul said to the centurion standing by him [who was binding him in order to flog him] ‘Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?’ When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him: ‘What are you about to do?  This man is a Roman citizen.’  The tribune came and asked Paul, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ The tribune answered, ‘It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.’  Paul said, ‘But I was born a citizen.’”

**[3]** Acts tells us that Paul/Saul, a devout Jew, was also a native and citizen of Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia (Acts 9:11; 22:3).  Tarsus was a city close to the Mediterranean Sea at the foot of the Tarsus Mountains.  It was in a strategic location on a road leading over the high passes from Asia Minor to Syria. An ancient geographer named Strabo places the importance of Tarsus on the same level as Athens. The Roman General Pompey had placed Tarsus under the direct control of Rome; Emperor Augustus, in gratitude for Cilicia’s help during the Roman civil wars, declared Tarsus as a “free city” in the Roman empire, which meant that everyone born in this ‘free city’ of the empire were full citizens of Rome. As a Roman citizen, Paul/Saul could never be tortured or whipped unless he was guilty of treason, and even then, had the right to a trial in Rome before such guilt could be declared. When he is captured in [**4]** Jerusalem, Paul uses his citizen-appeal to Rome before the Roman Governor Porcius Festus and King Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice (Acts 25:13, 23) at a “tribunal” held in Caesarea [Agrippa and Bernice are both great grandchildren of Herod the Great; Queen Bernice, who was Jewish, also had connections with the province of Cilicia.]

At his trial before Pilate and the Sanhedrin, Jesus did NOT have the basic rights of a citizen like those Paul exercised when he faced the authorities. Jesus had NO respect shown to him, NO voice of advocacy expressed on his behalf. Pilate’s questions offered only the ability to confess and submit, not to defend. Pilate may have thought to himself that Jesus was truly innocent, but he entertained no proof that it might have been so, only a shout from the crowds that they wanted to release the known criminal Barabbas as a less dangerous man than Jesus. Like so many of the poor people of his time, Jesus was condemned to death by crucifixion, to be a deterrent to others who might rise up in rebellion against the rich. Pilate practiced crucifixion as a show of terrible force against the ever-haunting fear of an unruly crowd. But Paul has a different set of circumstances: He has privileges with Governor Festus and Queen Berneice.

What is not so clear in this Acts narrative about his arrest in Jerusalem is whether Paul paid off Governor Felix with the money he intended as a gift (alms) to the ‘poor’ (i.e. poor among the saints/nation) in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17,26; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1). We do NOT have a record of Paul paying taxes to Rome or voting in any Roman elections, although he may have well been in agreement with Jesus’ admonition to “give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s (Mark 12:15-17; Matt. 22:18-21), given the text in Rom. 13:7, if we assume that Paul wrote this passage in Romans, but that assumption, as we will see in a moment, may not be so convincing.

   So, in general, the Book of Acts gives us a somewhat cloudy, but solid picture of Saul/Paul as a Roman citizen. Acts 22:3 tells us that Paul/Saul confirms that he was born in Tarsus. Yet, as a way of contrast or comparison, the Letters of Paul give us a somewhat different background for Paul, that of being a Jewish son from the Tribe of Benjamin. Paul tells us in his Letter to the Romans that he is an “Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the Tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1). He confirms this in his Letter to the Philippians, “circumcised on
the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law, a “Pharisee (Phil. 3:5),” [and if we are to believe Acts 23:6, a son of Pharisees]. Paul tells us here that his parents circumcised him when he was 8 days old as the
 **[5]** Torah required (Lev. 12:3). A connecting point for linking the two narratives together comes from outside the Bible, in a manuscript from one of the early church fathers named Jerome (342
– 420 CE), who tells us that Paul’s parents lived in a Judean town named Giscalis..They were forcibly removed from their home town in Judea to Tarsus when the Romans destroyed their town. There is some debate as to whether Paul was born while they were in Giscalis or after they moved to Tarsus. Certainly, Paul was proud of his tribal heritage; members of the tribe of Benjamin were reputed to be “rugged mountain warriors and champions of freedom.” But, on this point, things get very cloudy as to whether Paul identifies more with individuals or community, with urban or rural environments. In a general sense, whether one sees Paul as a
rugged individualist or a social organizer seems to depend on whether we are reading Acts or the Letters of Paul. At least one scholar, H.J. Schoeps, thinks that Paul drew his imagery from the “life of the state” and the “environment of a large city,” rather than from “the world of nature, the land, or agriculture.” According to Schoeps, Paul draws his images from the world of “trade and craft, seafaring, and building” and not from “tilling the land.” [Note that the Jewish ‘prophet’ Amos was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore-fig trees (Amos 7:14), the latter meaning that he literally ‘pinched the sycamore figs to hasten their ripening’ as well as gathering their fruit.] Acts 18:3 writes of Paul/Saul, that he was” of the same trade” [as Priscilla and Aquila of Pontus], who worked together as “tentmakers.” (Refer also to 1 Thess. 2:9).

**[6]**   Let’s now explore the other side in a little more detail. What does it mean to be Jewish prophet? In what ways does Paul reflect such a traditional identity? When Paul writes in Rom. 16:26 that his gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, are now “made known to all the Gentiles through the prophetic writings,” what do you suppose he might be writing about? Is this possibly a small clue to Paul’s role as a Jewish prophet? Let’s begin by looking at the general definition of a prophet. A prophet is: one who is a spiritual seer, inspired teacher or poet, one gifted with spiritual and moral insight, one who proclaims the ‘will of God.’ Sometimes, our cultural definition of a prophet implies one who foretells future events (soothsayer, clairvoyant, oracle) or a final authoritative revealer of God’s will, but this is not the biblical sense of the word “prophet.” The prophets were both truth-tellers and hope-tellers; they both spoke truth to those in power and hope to those in despair; they both sounded the alarm and encouraged a response; they spoke what people needed to hear and NOT what they wanted to hear. Prophets NOT only dared to speak for God, but also lived the message of God in the midst of the people (Jeremiah’s yoke; Jer. 27:2; 28:10; Ezekiel’s cut hair; Ezek. 5:1-4; Isaiah’s three-year walk; Isa 20:2). Prophets lived and spoke in a ‘right relationship’ (justice, righteousness) with God and neighbor; they ‘inhaled torah (teaching, law)’ to know and speak the heart of God. The ‘disciples of the prophets’ were trained in the role of the prophet ‘to guide the state aright and check all attempts at tyranny and injustice.’  (2 Kings 4:38; 5:22; 9:1, 4). For a prophet, no deliverance is possible without repentance and no peace without sincerity; sometimes the prophet must resist (1 Kings 22:22 “tell falsehoods to Ahab”) and sometimes comply (Jer. 28:5-7 “be a good citizen of Babylon”).

Jesus was considered by some to be the Prophet that God would raise up (Deut.18:15,18; Matt. 16:14). I think that Paul also thought of himself as a traditional prophet; not as a prophet to the Jews, but a prophet to the non-Jews, the Gentiles in the nations. To be sure, his life is altered significantly by how he understands the crucifixion and the resurrection, but he carries with him **[7]** a prophetic role. In Galatians 1:15, Paul uses the language also used by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah: ‘being called from the womb’ to serve God (Jer. 1:5; Isa. 49:1). Like Jesus, Paul believes that the Gentiles (non-Jews) are included in God’s promise of salvation; viewing his ministry as a calling to proclaim the gospel to the nations, to the Gentiles. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul offers the idea that God’s promise to Abraham as the father of many nations always included the Gentiles who would come to share Abraham’s faith (Rom. 4:16-17).” Paul cites the prophet Isaiah sixteen (16) times in the Letter to the Romans alone, but he also cites Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Joel, to name a few others.

           Jer. 8:9 “The wise shall be put to shame…”
           1 Cor. 1:27 “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.”
           Jer. 9:24 “let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me [the Lord].”
           1 Cor. 1:31 “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”
           Amos 5:10 “they abhor the one who speaks the truth”
           Gal. 4:16 “Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?”
            Joel 2:32 “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
            Romans 10:13 “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
            Isaiah 11:2 “the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal … the nations shall inquire of him.”
            Romans 15:12 “The root of Jesse shall come; in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

**[8]** As many of the Jewish prophets before him, Paul confronts the idolatry of Rome being dispersed into the nations [non-Romans]. For Paul, idolatry is much more than what one sees in the stone monuments of Greece and Rome, more than the large temples in Corinth dedicated to such gods as Aphrodite, Apollo, Asclepius, and Poseidon; more than the Acropolis and the Areopagus in Athens. Paul objects to the very spirit of idolatry which compromised table fellowship, the required libation to the emperor of Rome. He objects to the not-so-grand bargain whereby Jews were exempt from this daily libation because of sacrifices made in the Jerusalem temple on behalf of the emperor. So when Peter withdraws table fellowship with Paul in Antioch, separating Gentiles and Jews, Paul becomes angry at Peter’s compromise with idolatry and complicity with Rome. Peter’s actions violate the oneness of God and the oneness of Christ’s body. Paul is portraying the angry prophet who speaks truth to power. It is the duty of prophets to criticize all forms of idolatry. Looking ahead, Paul was put on trial in Rome for the crime of treason in not worshipping the Emperor, the ultimate form of idolatry.  Like Jesus, the Great Prophet, he sees himself constantly on the move, sometimes homeless, cold and naked, in danger every hour, dying every day (2 Cor. 11:23-28; 1 Cor. 15:30-31), receiving “the forty lashes minus one.” True to the Great Prophet, Paul holds out for the victory of Christ over such idolatry, wealthy influence and power. The Cross, the reputed symbol of Rome’s victory, is instead its scandalous defeat, glorifying Rome’s mistake in crucifying Jesus.

**[9]**   So, how are we to understand Romans 13:1-7? As a Jewish prophet, IS Paul encouraging “resistance” or “compliance?” Many think Paul did not write this part of Romans, that it is an interpolation added to his Letter at a later time. This part of Romans is a self-contained section which interrupts the flow of the Letter. When you look at Rom. 12:9-21 and Rom. 13:8-10, they flow smoothly into each other. These sections, flowing together, give the sense that the ‘day of the Lord is near,’ when all will change; so why would Paul encourage obedience to Roman empire? The interrupting section is out of place. Also, there is no joining particle or
conjunction and it uses a 3rd person format which is unlike the preceding and subsequent
sections. Paul is not typically concerned with any individual’s relationship to the empire; this passage comes from a later period when the churches were concerned about living peaceably within the empire and not about the imminent end of the world. Even if Paul did not write Rom. 13:1-7, we should make several observations about it:  To be sure, it is NOT a justification for civil disobedience, but it DOES imply that there are limits to power expressed in the duty to
**[10]** obey. John Calvin wrote: “tyrannies and unjust exercise of power, as they are full of disorder, are not an ordained government.” Jonathan Mayhew, one of the preacher-heroes during the American Revolution, wrote of this passage: “rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Confessing Church in Germany was a “resisting church” rather than a “complying church.” As we read through the passage, I think we should note how outcomes play an important role in how we might decide who is ordained into authority.  Do the outcomes reflect good or evil?

**[11]** Render [Give back] to everyone/all their dues:  to whom the tax, the tax; to whom the revenue, the revenue; to whom the fear, the fear (respect); to whom the honor, the honor.”

 And we might add, to whom the conscience, the conscience; to whom the resistance, the resistance; to whom the compliance, the compliance. So, in retrospect, I do think Paul is more of a Jewish prophet than a Roman citizen. If he is the latter, it has more to do with rights than responsibilities. As far as we know, Paul did NOT try to vote in Roman elections, but he DID try to disrupt the idolatry of the empire, as much as possible.

**[12]** There is no mention of Paul paying his taxes; he was homeless and poor most of the time. In both Acts and the Letters, he seems to honor his jailors and the soldiers who guarded him (Phil. 1:12-14; Acts 16:27-29; 28:16). This was an important signal that he treated the authorities with respect. Still, he did not give daily libations to the emperor because that would be idolatry, but he might have prayed for him, even as he faced the lions in the arena. Part of being a citizen, Paul might say, is standing together in solidarity to show oneness in the common struggle.

God is One, from the far reaches of the north, south, east, west, the Body of Christ is One; no other gods exist or have reality. This oneness is the central reality for Paul. (Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13). Conforming citizen; disturbing prophet, of the One Lord! Amen.