Third Sunday in Lent (Mar 23, 2025) –Third in a three-sermon series
          on the Life and Theology of Paul
Sermon Title:  Paul: Greek Philosopher or Cilician Poet?
Scripture: Philippians 2:6-11
Theme: Will the real Paul please stand up?  Rational Debater of Athens or Rhyming Wordsmith of Corinth?

“Will the real Paul please stand up?” Two weeks ago, we engaged with the question of whether Paul was more of a Crusader or more of a Pastor, more of a rabbi? The Crusader image being one of get-them-in-the-door and keep moving; the rabbi image as keep-them-in-the-fold and nurture their spirits. Paul seems to be more of a reluctant preacher and a budding pastor, not so much a traveling evangelist as a lingering counselor. Last Sunday, we engaged with the question of whether Paul was more of a Conforming Citizen or a Disruptive Prophet? The citizen image being one of compliance to the rule of law, the prophet image being one of resisting the rule of law. In both conversations, there were arguments to be made on both sides of the discussion.

**[2]** This Sunday is the third and final sermon in the series. Is Paul more of a Greek Philosopher or a Cilician Poet? Did his arguments fit in with the Athenian debaters? Or was Paul out of place in the great debating halls of the Areopagus? Would he have been more in place among the Cilician poets? Might he have been better known as the rhyming wordsmith of Corinth? Coining a new language of the gospel realm, describes a God who “calls the things that are not, as though there already were, calling them into existence, as if they already existed.” (Rms. 4:17)

**[3]** There is some evidence that Paul felt confident enough to debate philosophy on the hallowed grounds of Socrates and Plato. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that Paul debated with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens, in the great marketplace of ideas, inside the famous Areopagus (Acts 17).  Epicurus taught the “art of rational living” whereby the “joy of the mind” is superior to the pleasures of the body, because one can more easily and successfully gain control over the **[4]** mind than one can gain control over nature. Zeno founded the school of Stoicism, teaching that the virtuous man is the one who has attained happiness through knowledge. The highest duty of the wise man is to regulate his life by mastering his emotions and passions. Paul counters these philosophical arguments with the gospel of an unknown God, a God who cannot be known through intellectualism, but only through intelligent emotion, or emotive intelligence, one who **[5]** can only be known through relationship.  In the spirit of Diogenes, Paul searches through the darkness with his lantern for an honest man, in the words of Acts, one who “gropes after God, as one who searches the darkness to find him even though he is not far from each one of us.” (Acts 17:27).

**[6]** In his second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul suggests that imagination is a tool of argumentation that blocks our knowledge of God:  “Casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).”  The Greek words that we translate as “imaginations” in this passage are “dianoia” and “logismos,” conveying the meaning of “deep thought or reasoning” and “argumentative reasoning.”  In Paul’s mind, the deep and argumentative reasoning blocks the knowledge of God; the wisdom of the wise, the discernment of the discerning, the debater of this age blocks understanding of God. Paul says the foolishness of the cross is the very power of God unto understanding; eloquent logical presentation empties the cross of its power.

**[7]** But, Paul does offer some philosophical profundity to the philosophers who were listening to him in the great halls of debate.  “God is one in whom we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28).  Paul defines God as a context in which we live; even though we know God through the human and divine Christ, God is beyond any image that we have in our mind about God; God is the context for all images of God.  Paul is not trying to be a universalist in his thinking; he is not trying to say “all people are like this, or like that…”  There are too many human exceptions to the rules; although he might say that all people are alike and all people are different at the same time. Paul is not universal in his thinking, he is contextually specific in what he recommends as advice.  One size does not fit all.  God is a context for our thinking and not a grand reflection of ourselves or an extension of our best qualities as humans.  We live and move and have our being in the divine; without that context, we cannot survive or flourish. From a modern Physics perspective, an interesting note in this regard is the discovery of the cross-shaped molecule called “Laminin” that is described by motivational speakers like Louie Giglio as the glue that holds our universe together at the subatomic level. “In Christ, all things hold together … Clothe yourself with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Col. 1:17; 3:14)

Poking a little fun at himself, Paul writes: “we are fools for Christ’s sake … you are distinguished, but we are without honor.” It is in this vein that Paul is a poet. He is a humorist in the same way that we think of Will Rogers; humble yet insightful with the truth. While he is on Mars Hill, Paul recites from an ancient Cilician poet named Aratus, “we are God’s offspring;
we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.” The Greek word that we translate “poetry” means creativity; in the ancient understanding, a poet is a creative person in the arts and not just a wordsmith. A poet sometimes uses words that penetrate our deepest feelings with truth.  (Beauty is truth and truth is beauty, that is all you know on earth, and all you need to know. John Keats, Ode to a Grecian Urn). Ultimately, a poet cannot describe the reality of God, the mystery in the universe, in human words. Words cannot capture or control deity, whether their context is prose or poetry. Words are human vessels that are leaky and insufficient to hold reality. Yet when words rhyme, they carry much more weight. We use an interesting phrase in our common parlance today that “history does not repeat itself, but often rhymes.” Might it be that Paul could recognize patterns in truth that rhyme theologically?

**[8] Paul recognizes a truth pattern in Hosea 13:14, which he translates for us with a poetic word-twist:

From Hosea: Where, O Death, are your plagues? Where, O Grave (Sheol), is your sting?
1 Cor. 15:55: “Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?”**In the wording, Paul substitutes victory for plagues, sting for calamity or destruction, the personification of death for the grave? The personification of *Thanate* (Death) is both physical and spiritual. The forces of death are at work in sin and separation: “Where, O Sin, is your sting?” “Where, O Guilt, is your sting?”

“I will redeem them from the power and destruction of the grave.” ->
“I will swallow up sin, guilt, despair, alienation, separation, death in a personified Victory that we call Resurrection.

**[9]** Paul sees a “rhyming pattern” in the farewell speech of Moses, and **what in later years came to be remembered** as the farewell speech of Jesus to his disciples—something he acknowledges in his Letter to the Romans:

Keep God’s Word! Choose Life! Walk in God’s Ways! ~ Moses’ Farewell (Deut. 30:11-20)
Choose The Way the Truth the Life! – Jesus’ Farewell (John 14:6)

**[10**] and so Paul extracts a rhyme from the farewell speech of Moses found in Deuteronomy:

Rms. 10:6-8: “Do not say in your heart … who will ascend …. who will descend …
The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart
Deut: 30:11-14: “[the word] is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away; … who will ascend … who will cross the sea … the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

**[11**] Yet, having acknowledged that words do not create or restrict reality, we should at least acknowledge that poetry brings us closer to an expression of what cannot be expressed. It sneaks up on truth and gets as close as possible to the curtain between sacred and profane, holy and ordinary. It searches for a thin place where truth might be revealed from its hidden-ness. My New Testament Professor at Phillips Theological Seminary (now retired) and his wife have co-written a new book which presents some of the writings of Paul as poetry; sounding out the words to gain greater meaning and clarity, by hearing the sound, we can sometimes detect nuances of expression NOT available to the English language in the same way that it IS available in the Greek language. In many ways, the letters of Paul were written to be heard with the ears and not to be read with the eyes. There were not enough copies of the scrolls for everyone to have a copy to take home and read; they were read before the congregation.  They were perhaps “sounded” out in front of the congregation for greater feeling as a master poet reads his poetry before groups of others in a public setting. The words must be heard in a certain way to get the meaning intended by the poet, or author.  The hearers had to share a common context to hear the words properly.

So, here is an example of sound mapping Paul’s letter to Philemon. It starts with noting that some scholars (looking only at the manuscripts) have proposed that Onesimus is not a runaway slave, but instead the alienated brother of Philemon (Callahan). What we learn from sound mapping this letter confirms the opposite, that Onesimus is a runaway slave and not Philemon’s brother. What we also learn from the sound mapping is that the letter of Philemon is a public letter and not a private letter. The “performance space” is the community *(koinonia*) meeting in Philemon’s house. Artist and wordsmith, Paul, uses wordplays and sound effects within the letter to transform Onesimus from slave to beloved brother. Paul totally downplays his apostolic status in this letter—he is simply and purely, “a prisoner of the anointed Jesus” and beyond that an “old man.” Hence, a much reduced status. More importantly, he wants to appeal to the community and to Philemon as encouraging compliance and not commanding it. What we discover in this sound mapping is that Jesus is the context for the community, the identity of Jesus and the community are one and the same. The *koinonia* or spirit of the community is more than a vague sense of being together; it is the embodiment of the Lord in the community. So, Paul then constructs a message for the presentation space of Philemon’s house church in this way: Paul has given birth to Onesimus while being in prison. Onesimus is Paul’s very own dear child. Paul rhymes “dear child” with “Christ Jesus.” Onesimus is part of Paul’s own body, as a mother is to her infant child. Paul has given birth. So, Philemon and the congregation which meets in his house, are brother NOT only in the Lord, but also in the FLESH. Those in the community there are also children of Paul. So, Onesimus, upon his return, should be fully accepted in the community; Paul even writes that he will guarantee any debts that Onesimus owes to anyone. The sound mapping of this letter emphasizes in sound that all should breathe together and “refresh the heart” of the community, the hearts inside the community, and that in so doing, energy will be created through the sharing of Philemon’s faith, Paul’s faith, and Onesimus’ faith in order to “refresh the gut of the body, the heart of the body” together. This is one example of how sound mapping can help us understand and re-translated the New Testament.

This poetic understanding of humanity and divinity is why songs mean so much to us in worship.  The tunes we use stay with us throughout the week, and through the tunes, we remember the words. Charles Wesley was so valuable to his brother because he wrote so many hymns to help people on the frontier remember their faith.  And what about Fanny Crosby?  So many valuable songs and messages that allow us to feel our faith, and the ground of our being. God works through the spiritual songs that we share each Sunday in worship.  This is one of the reasons attending worship is so valuable; we cannot just hear about it from someone else, we must experience it to feel the reality of it.  A poet works out of fear and trembling, out of emotion, and not just reason. God works through our poetry to teach us truth and beauty, and many other things about life.

“Shape clay into a vessel, it is the space within that makes it useful.”  Cut doors and windows for a room; it is the holes which make it useful.”  “Profit comes from what is there; usefulness [comes] from what is not there.” (Lao Tsu).  Poetry says as much through what is not there, and maybe even more, than it says through the words that are there. It allows us to feel our truth and trust our truth.

And so, we come to that ancient song of Kenosis, that ancient poem that Paul quotes in his Letter to the Philippians. Might it be one of the Cilician poems that Paul knew by heart? It would pre-date his letter (61 or 62 CE) by several years, one of the earliest known hymns of praise among the Followers of the Way, perhaps with the notoriety of Cleanthes’ Hymn to Zeus (330-230 BCE) written by a follower of Zeno and the Stoic philosophers. What we see in our Scripture for today is a fragment of what is translated in later circles as a Christological Hymn. Praise to the One who is truly self-less in nature, who self-emptied from divinity into humanity, from all-powerful to without-power, from rich to poor, so that we also might inherit that same love which puts the needs of others above our own and makes our joy complete and full.

Paul is a poet when he calls upon us to go beyond satisfaction to hunger. What are we truly hungry for in this worship today?  What do we want to know about the universe in which we live?  What will it take to make our joy complete and full?  Perhaps it is in knowing that we are as diverse as we are the same; we experience fullness when we do not exclude, when we wait upon the other before we begin. We experience fullness by including as many ideas as possible and then stepping aside to include even more, knowing no boundaries to our possibility in God’s Love through Christ Jesus.  Yes, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the ever increasing glory of God!

Will the real Paul please stand up? Inquiring minds want to know. Process Philosopher? Inspiration to Damaris and Dionysius! Rhyming Historian? Clever Wordsmith? Kenotic Poet? Thinker before his time? Artist Un-timely born? Disruptive Prophet, Conforming Citizen, Caring Nurse and Pastoral rabbi, Crusader for the Gospel? We honestly want to know!

Alleluia! Amen.