

2. A sermon in a stone; Paul's letter of tears in 2 Corinthians. Rev. Rosalind Gnatt 4.Feb.18

*Boasting is not going to help me, so I will go on and tell about visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man, who was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether he was in the body or out of the body, I don't know—only God knows. But such a man was caught up to the third heaven. Yes, I do not know, but God knows that he was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible words, such that no human is allowed to speak them.*

*It is worth boasting about that man, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. If I wanted to boast, I would be no fool in doing so, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't do it, because I don't want anyone to give me credit beyond what they can see in me or hear about me. And so that I don't become conceited by the surpassingly wonder of the revelations I have received from God, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Poor Paul – he seems to be at his wit's end with the work of congregation building. Anyone who has tried to build a congregation, to lay the first stone from nothing – really from only an idea, like Paul, knows it isn't be easy and, yes, it can wear on one's sense of self-worth. Paul was raised in the coastal city of Tarsus – one of the most important trade centers on the Mediterranean – a sort of Hamburg of its day. His pious family were probably Roman citizens, and sent young Paul to the famous Hillel school. Hillel was famous for providing a balanced education to its students that included classical literature, philosophy and ethics.

Whatever Paul did, he did with gusto. He was driven to do God's will as he saw it, and until his conversion, that meant doing everything he could to get rid of the little groups of Jesus followers. He arrested them, had them thrown into prison or, when possible, had them killed. He says in his letter to the Galatians, *You've heard about my earlier life in Judaism, how I violently persecuted God's church. I did my best to destroy it. I was far ahead of my fellow Jews in my zeal for the traditions of my ancestors.* But the minute he recovered from the shock of his conversion experience and was baptized, he went straight to the synagogues and began declaring that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah, transformed overnight from persecutor to persecuted missionary. Imagine the dismay of the little groups of Jesus followers when this man, this fanatical scourge to Christians, jumps into their midst with the same zeal and says he is there to proclaim Jesus as messiah. Paul must have had an astonishing kind of charisma to have been accepted by the people he had so recently tormented.

But here in Corinth, Paul was really at the end of his rope. He is staggered by the disrespect he's sensing – so much so that he resorts to telling, albeit in the third person, about a very personal, perhaps psychologically unbalanced event: his trip to the third heaven – paradise - where he heard extraordinary words that humans aren't allowed to hear; so much so that he gets caught up in scolding: "Look at how much I suffered for you!"

He tries to avoid the appearance of bragging: *“That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* Paul seems to be preaching to a congregation that isn’t listening. He can’t defend himself. He’s, as we say, between a rock and a hard place.

Though Paul had spent years traveling with various other missionaries, and establishing any number of congregations, Corinth had its own set of problems. A Greek city-state, a site that had been occupied for around 7,000 years before Paul’s time, it was a major trading hub and must have been at least as beautiful then as the area is today. The congregation Paul established was one of the largest and most successful of his ministry. And, as we ought to know, with success comes a raft of other problems, among them being questions of faith practice. Paul was building congregations all over the world of southern Europe and the middle east at a time when there were no written documents – none at all. Paul’s letters to these various congregations were the first pieces of writing the early church had – all else was word of mouth. If you’ve ever played the circle game of “Telephone,” you know how long it takes for the content of a message to become unrecognizable. But the problems weren’t only about words – they were about questions of authority – who’s in charge - and what about the money the congregation is gathering to sustain itself? Where’s it going? How is my offering being used?

And these questions bring us to a timely topic – our own congregation. Here we are, on the anniversary of our very first Sunday only 3 years ago. We numbered about 5 then. Last month there were 47 of us worshipping here together. We’ve accomplished a good deal in these 3 years, thanks to your support, our work together and to the generosity of the Bergkirche for letting us be a part of their worship programming. There are things we still want to do; ways we still want to grow. But we have reason to rejoice. And now that the United Church of Christ, Global Ministries division has acknowledged us as an official part of their international outreach, the UCC/EKHN partnership has moved from the “Occasional visit” phase into supporting a young congregation together.

We’re here – we are now seen by both the UCC and the EKHN as an up-and-running congregation. It was such a monumental thing you did – meeting, and even exceeding the €15,000 we needed in order to get approval to continue into 2018. None of us knows the future, but we’ll discover it together. This is your congregation, and you have invested your time and money into its existence. The congregation’s finances are open to you. If you’re interested in reviewing the congregation’s expenditures for 2017, give me a call.

So that, my friends, is my sermon in a stone. Only recently are other congregations becoming aware that our little congregation exists. Only recently is there curiosity about why, to quote the song from the musical, “Follies,” we’re still here. No one really thought we would be – the notion of “some little something different” in the middle of the great ship called Tradition, was ludicrous. Let’s not boast about our success – but rather, let’s build on what we have begun. There’s work to be done, and every one of you has a talent to share. Please share yourself – get involved. It’s rewarding.

The writer of the Matthew Gospel captured this verse from Psalm 118, and I think it has some wisdom for us as well: *The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful in our eyes.*