

Bottom line: God can use every aspect of our lives to influence people and spread the Gospel. When we follow Jesus, we are not asked to deny our personalities, interests and ideas. God can use those to reach people in unique and powerful ways

I. Introduction to the end of the series

- a. Formed and reformed in God’s spirit, working our way through Acts and seeing how God is constantly in the business of expanding our imagination and understanding of how the Spirit is at work
 - i. We have seen how the spirit fell where it pleased at Pentecost, empowering those in Jerusalem to speak the gospel in all different tongues. We’ve heard how Peter saw that God was at work in the Gentiles as Cornelius helped him to interpret a dream that he had, realizing that God was much bigger than he had ever previously imagined. And we have heard about the conversion of Paul, a former persecutor of Christians, until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus and then began to spread the gospel all over the world.
 - ii. That’s where our scripture finds us today.

II. Paul’s story

- a. Specific time and place
 - i. Pentecost, in Jerusalem. Paul is speaking in a synagogue and sharing his conversion story. The Jews that are listening and are in support of his message until he mentions the Gentiles. They are angry and take him outside to kill him. But then somewhat miraculously, he is taken into custody by the Roman army. But this is precisely what Paul wanted to happen
 - ii. **This is not a coincidence.** Many scholars believe that this timing and specific place of Paul’s speech was intentional. The Roman army was highly concerned about rioting. Governors and rulers of certain cities and territories could be fined, removed from office, and even put on trial if subjects in their providence got out of hand. So on a high holy day, such as Pentecost, there would have been a heightened Roman presence in order to prevent any notions of rebellion
 - iii. So Paul wanted to get arrested by Rome. Why? Well in one sense, it was a life-saving tactic. If Paul would not have been arrested, he would have been surely killed. Yet there was another part of Paul’s strategy. Right before he is to be flogged, and I mean right before, he reveals that he is a Roman citizen, a fact that he has not always been forthcoming about before this in the narrative of Acts.

1. This revelation sets in motion Paul's journey upward in the governing Roman empire until the end of Acts. There were privileges that came along with being a Roman citizen
 - a. Cicero, a Roman statesman wrote about this "to bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination"
 2. Paul knows that his identity carries weight and power. His revealing of his identity stops the soldier about to flog him and the commander in their tracks. Paul's birthright carries with it power, power that comes with a high price as the commander reveals. Paul knew what he was doing. But the Roman officials had no idea what to do next. For they are face with a dilemma. To release Paul would mean sending him to certain death by the angry mob outside. But to hold him for no reason as a Roman citizen not charged with a crime is also politically dangerous, and the rulers could be held personally responsible.
 3. This journey and confusion by Rome eventually lands Paul before the Emperor of Rome, all the while declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ. **Simply Because of who Paul is, he is given a once in a lifetime moment to share God's love grace and mercy with the most powerful men on earth.**
- b. When Paul was converted, he was asked to change in some ways, like to stop persecuting and killing Christians, **but we need to be clear that Paul's conversion and indeed any conversion at all is not a call to completely whitewash our context and forget who we have been formed to be.**
- i. As Meghan and I have mentioned in this series, we see that it is some of the same personality traits that made Paul such a successful persecutor of Christians that in turn make him a passionate and zealous preacher. And in this passage, there are some things about his personality and identity that he never had control or choice over, but yet he is called to employ those things, using every resource that he has at his disposal in order to spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. **God called Paul not in spite of who he was, but because of who he was. And the same is true for us. God doesn't call you in spite of who you are, but because of who you are.**

III. So What about us?

- i. This passage is important for us, if for nothing else than to point out the importance of NOT being Paul. Each of us exists, as Paul did, in a specific time and place. Recognizing our specific contexts
 1. Studies show that the total number of people that have ever lived on our earth is a number somewhere around 108 billion. But there has never been anyone who has lived in your time and place. No one with your talents, passions, hurts, creativity, and education. You are truly unique. Each of us is 1 in 108 billion
 2. You are the only version of you we have, so we are all counting on you to show us what it means to be you in this world.

3. We are all gifted, and we are all called to share those gifts with the world.
 - ii. It can be easy to think “Yeah, yeah Preacher, but I can’t preach like Paul or prophesy like Peter or evangelize like Mary Magdalene or sing like Miriam.” I’m just really good at quilting, or I’m just a good listener, or I’m just, I’m just, I’m just...
 - iii. **If you’ve ever found yourself thinking “I’m Just”, then I want us all to pay close attention to this video. I’m Just a Florist**

IV. Regarding Paul, it is quite remarkable that a Jew from Tarsus, declared innocent from any charge brought against him, is given the space to declare his innocence before Roman magistrates, a tribune, two governors, a king, and is on the way to see the emperor. In addition to his innocence, Paul is also given the chance to declare the salvific work that the God of Israel is doing through Jesus Christ, and that this salvation is available to all; the Holy Spirit is pouring out on all, Jews and Gentiles, the righteous and the unrighteous. Paul took the Gospel into the most radical and implausible places of power and influence in his Acts journey. No ordinary Jew or follower of the Way would have ever been given an opportunity to evangelize the most power men of the world at that time. Paul, however, was commissioned and empowered by the Lord, and he used his whole self, all of his identity in order to fulfill the work that God had placed before him.

- a. It’s true that none of us could do what Paul did, because none of us are Paul. And thank God for that, because Paul can’t do the things that we are capable of as well. Each of us has been formed in a specific time specific talents and passions to reach specific people.
- b. **As God is forming and reforming us through God’s spirit, we are being shaped into the best versions of ourselves. We are not asked to be anyone other than exactly who God created us to be, and to share those gifts and passions and resources with the world to build our corner of the Kingdom of God here on this earth**

V. Sending out – I can’t make this up! I wouldn’t have been this creative.

- i. Extra flowers from a funeral yesterday. Perhaps God wanted us to have a visual of the gifts and passions and beauty that exists in this room amongst each of us.
- ii. We have the ability to bless others and to brighten the world and make it a better place. But it only works if we are willing to share those gifts with the world.
 1. After the service, I would love it if there would be those who would take these to our shut in members, and those in the hospital. Perhaps someone who needs to be reminded of their beauty and the beauty that can exist in this world.
- iii. Let’s not let these beautiful gifts sit here and exist only in the church. Rather let’s take them out into the world, sharing ourselves and our gifts in the name and grace of Jesus Christ.

And let us perhaps let us see ourselves in the flowers. Each one is shaped differently, different sizes, different colors, different smells. Yet when we come together and share our full selves, we can create something truly beautiful.

So let us go out, living fully into who God is calling us to be, and let's make something beautiful. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.