

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, September 5, 2021
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time**

“Smack Down: Paul vs. Peter”

**Six of six sermons of a series entitled:
“Apostolic Martyrs: Sacrifices Made for the Early Church”**

Christian Scripture: Galatians 2:9-14



Well friends, we finally arrived at the conclusion of our six-week long sermon series on the apostles and the contributions they made to the founding of the Christian Church. We conclude the series with the two granddaddies of them all: Peter and Paul.



In just a little bit we will celebrate Holy Communion, as the disciples did with Jesus. We want to have plenty of time for that. So, let us get the 'fun facts' out of the way now – we don't have time to waste!

INTRODUCTION

- **Some people are known by**
- **Various names**
 - Peter/Cephas/Simon
 - Saul/Paul
 - Nathaniel/Bartholomew
 - Abram/Abraham
 - Jacob/Israel
 - Daniel/Belteshazzar

First fun fact: as did almost all of the disciples, both Peter and Paul had multiple names.



Paul's original name was 'Saul', Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a Pharisee and a persecutor of Christians. On his way to capture and imprison Christians in Damascus, he had a miraculous vision of Jesus the Christ who simply asked, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). As a result of his conversion, Saul changed his name to 'Paul'. I assume the name change was due to the fact that 'Saul' was a quintessential (Hebrew) name and 'Paul' was a far more cosmopolitan Latin name that would allow the Gentile world to better relate to him. Paul was a Roman citizen, so it makes sense that he might have used the name 'Paul' on his 'passport' even if he had not travelled widely as an apostle of the Early Church.

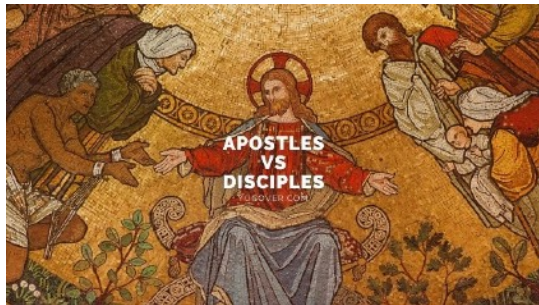


Peter also had the name 'Simon'. And if Simon and Peter are not enough, the name 'Peter' is 'Petros' in Greek which means 'stone'.¹ And then, as if three are not enough, there is a fourth name: Cephas, which means 'rock' in Latin. Many of all us are familiar with these variations. But, let me blow your socks off! Jesus actually called Peter 'Kepa'. 'Kepa' is 'stone' or 'rock' in Aramaic, the language that

¹ Actually, rock or stone is actually 'Petra' in Greek. But, 'Petros' is the masculine version of the same.

Jesus spoke. This was translated to ‘Cephas’ in Latin, or ‘Petros’ in Greek, or ‘Rock’ in English. So, we have Simon, Peter, Petros, Cephas, Rock, and, as Jesus called him, ‘Kepa’. Tradition recounts that Jesus called Peter ‘Kepa’ because Jesus chose Peter, for whatever reason, to be ‘the rock’ upon which Jesus would build the church (Matthew 16:18).

HMMMM. I think it would be fun for everyone at church to call me ‘Everett’ for a week. What do you think about that?



Alright, name variations were fun fact number one. Now, fun fact number two. In this sermon series I have always used the term ‘apostle’ synonymously with the term ‘disciple’. In doing this, I have assumed that all the disciples, save Judas Iscariot, became apostles – or ‘sent emissaries’. However, Paul is the only apostle who was *not* a ‘disciple’. Yet, by force of will, by self-declaration, with utter confidence, and perhaps arrogance, Paul became an apostle. And mind you, Paul did not see himself as some junior or second-class apostle. Oh, no. Paul understood himself to be an equal among equals despite the fact that he was not one of the twelve disciples. Neither did the resurrected Jesus appear to Paul as he

did the other disciples. Nonetheless, Paul felt himself *bona fide*, worthy, accredited, empowered, and divinely appointed by Christ to be an apostle. So, fun fact number two is simply that Paul is the only apostle in our series who was not one of Jesus' twelve or thirteen (or more) disciples.

In our scripture telling of a contestation between Paul and Peter, we approach the crux of this morning's message. Recall that during Paul and Peter's time, the Early Church was under many threats. One threat was the Jewish authorities, as represented by Saul himself. The other threat was the Roman empire. As followers of the Christ, Peter and Paul were stuck between the proverbial 'rock and a hard place'. The 'rock' being the past Hebrew culture and religion and the 'hard place' being the future Greco-Roman (or, Gentile) world that was fast on the ascendency through the vehicle of imperial empire.



Peter was a strong leader who leaned toward tradition and, what I might call, 'religio-cultural' consolidation and thus *exclusion*. Paul was also a strong leader. Yet, unlike Peter, Paul leaned toward innovation and 'religio-cultural' expansion

and thus *inclusion*. For me neither is right and neither is wrong – in and of themselves. Tradition and homogeneity are beautiful and good – they are blessings, but they can also be curses. Innovation and diversity are also beautiful and good – they are blessings, but they can also be curses. Think about it. Today, we will recite ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. There is something deeply and profoundly comforting about reciting the prayer in unison as people of faith who have been raised in and by the church. The Lord’s Prayer is good. But, for someone who has just walked through our doors (or, more accurately, for those who *never* will walk through our doors) not having ever before attended church, such a prayer in unison is intimidating, alienating, and off-putting. So, tradition and innovation, I think, are beautiful and limiting.



Yet, if we get right down to it – the argument is not whether ‘tradition is good or bad’ or if ‘innovation is good or bad’. They are both good *and* bad. The issue may be ‘what is tactically and strategically more efficacious’? So, it is not

‘what is right and wrong?’ The question, in a time of vulnerability *and* possibility, is ‘what is effective and what is ineffective, tradition or innovation’?

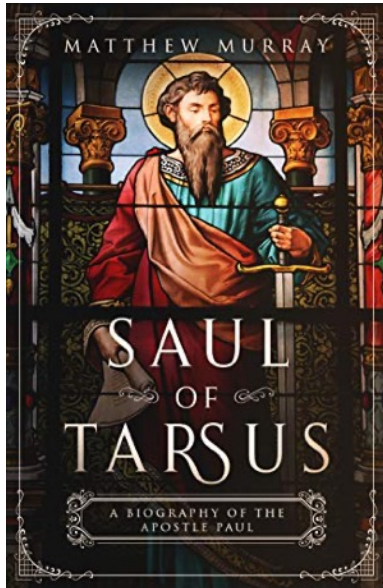


If we look at Jesus as an example, it is clear to me that he chose innovation. How many times in the scriptures did Jesus say, “You have heard it said...” and how many times did he follow that question with “now I say to you...”? (Matthew 5:38-48). One of Jesus’ most quintessential declarations is: “I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it” (Matthew 5:17). Paradoxically, Jesus respected tradition by overturning it, and thus improving it.



Friends, Centre Church, indeed all of mainline Christianity and Catholicism, is in a time of great vulnerability *and* possibility. We can choose tradition or

innovation. We can choose homogenization or diversity. We can choose exclusion or inclusion. All have their benefits. All have their detractions. Yet, for good or for bad, what did Jesus choose? Jesus chose innovation. Jesus chose diversity. Jesus chose inclusion.



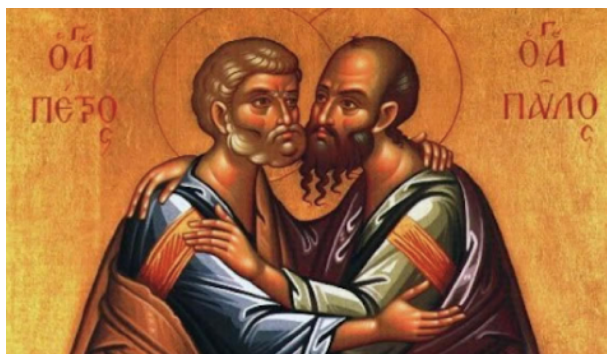
And somehow, somehow, somehow, a complete ass from Tarsus understood Jesus' ministry directly from the Holy Spirit and secondhand from the disciples (who themselves didn't even get it – or if they did, they waffled). They waffled because they did not wish to lose the beauty they had in a traditional faith community. Saul however, on the road to Damascus, lost everything (his sight, for one...), and he could thus re-write the faith tradition. And he did.

This is what the 'smack down' between Paul and Peter was about – the re-writing of the faith tradition.

Friends, at least as far as I am concerned, there will be no ‘smack down’ at Centre Church. I love our church. I love our tradition. I love our history. Yet, we are in an era of secularization and pandemic whereby our church is terrifically vulnerable *and* full of possibilities. I am as nervous as you about innovation. We are in this together.



What is the end of the ‘smack down’ story? Well, the traditional church of Jerusalem first advocated by Peter and led by ‘James the Just’ died with the Temple’s fall in 70 AD. Tradition, exclusion, and homogeneity did not withstand the winds of historical change. Peter had his ‘barbeque’ on the roof and realized the traditional ways needed to be let go of (Acts 10:9-16).



Peter joined Paul. They both became brother apostles. They spread the gospel to the ends of the then known world. In Rome, they both died martyrs' deaths in defense of the faith. And the Christian faith grew exponentially. Not a bad result for a 'smack down', eh?

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"