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**Summer Preaching Series:**  
*Characters of the Bible*  
**Paul**

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

September 2, 2018  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

# Summer Preaching Series

## *Characters of the Bible: Paul*

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Acts 26:9-21  
Psalm 67

Galatians 1:11-24  
Matthew 10:16-22

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...  
There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus”  
(Gal. 3:26-28).

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or  
arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable  
or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the  
truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures  
all things. Love never ends”  
(1 Cor. 13:4-8a)

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor  
depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us  
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”  
(Rom. 8:38-39)

These quotes are some of the most well-known and recognized scriptures in the New Testament. They come to us directly from the pen of one of the most influential figures in Christianity, St. Paul. No one person, except Jesus himself, has had more of an impact on Christianity than the apostle Paul, the first-century Hellenized Jew turned Christian missionary and leader. Over half of the books of the New Testament are directly or indirectly related to Paul. Seven are authentically believed to have been written by Paul's own hand and five are believed to have been written in his name. Today, we conclude our summer preaching series, “Characters of the Bible,” by focusing on Paul's life and leadership and how his story connects to our own stories.

According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul was from the Greek city of Tarsus (Acts 21:39), located in the southeastern part of Asia Minor, in what is today modern Turkey. He was born sometime during Jesus' lifetime. And like Jesus, Paul and his family were Jewish. But unlike Jesus, Paul studied both Greek rhetoric and the Jewish Scriptures extensively and formally. He became a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5) and was totally committed to understanding and practicing his religion according to the strictest standards of the day. As a Pharisee, Paul's religion would have centered on the Law of God, the exact and thorough adherence to which was his ultimate goal of devotion. Paul considered himself “blameless” in respect to the level of fidelity that the Law demanded (Phil. 3:6). It was this fervor for and dedication to the Law that led him to clash with the budding Christian community.

Paul never met Jesus during his earthly life and ministry. But as a young man Paul had heard about the itinerant preacher with a small following who was opposed by the Jewish leaders and executed by the Romans for sedition against the state. Paul also knew that Jesus' followers believed that Jesus was the messiah. For Paul the Pharisee, hearing Jesus called the messiah was blasphemy. The claim offended Paul and, in his mind, provided him with sufficient grounds to persecute the Christian church, which he did with fervor. Paul was so zealous in his persecution of Christians that he gained a reputation among the churches as a sworn enemy (Gal. 1:13-23).

All of this changed when the greatest persecutor of the church became its greatest proponent. The turning point in Paul's life came in his encounter with the risen Jesus and his subsequent conversion to Christianity. In his letters, Paul attributes his conversion to God's direct intervention. Though not written by Paul, our first lesson from Acts presents us with one version of Paul's conversion story, in which Paul is depicted talking to King Agrippa about his experience of seeing the Risen Christ and receiving a personal message from him. In our second lesson Paul, in a letter to the Christian community in Galatia, describes his experience this way, "...God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles." Paul experienced a profoundly transformative encounter with Christ that literally changed the track and tenor of his life. No longer seeking to destroy those proclaiming the gospel, Paul joined them and became one of the gospel's leading spokespersons.

Paul preached the gospel in cities and towns throughout modern-day Syria, Turkey and Greece, all of which were significant areas of growth for Christianity in its first few decades. Paul played a large role in this growth. Though a Jew himself, Paul understood his calling from God to be an "apostle to the Gentiles," or non-Jews. He was one of the first apostles to believe and preach that new life in Christ was available to all people, Jew or Gentile. With this philosophy in mind, he established Christian communities in cities that had previously been untouched by a Christian presence. He would begin a church, stay with them for a while, teaching and providing instruction; then he would move on to another city and start from scratch. Paul communicated with these fledgling Christian communities by letter, several of which are preserved in our New Testament, and range in purpose from encouragement to admonishment, and instruction. In these letters, we get a glimpse of early Christianity. Written earlier even than the gospels, Paul's letters are some of the first preserved documents of the Christian faith.

Over the course of his ministry, Paul was imprisoned several times and was eventually sentenced to die in Rome. Like many of Jesus' followers, and like Jesus himself, Paul did not lead an easy life, nor did he meet an easy death. But even death could not silence Paul's message of faith in Christ. Because of their inclusion in the Bible, Paul's written instructions to early Christian communities has shaped over 2000 years of Christianity and still shapes our modern understanding of who Christ is and what it means to be Christian.

Paul is one of the most analyzed figures in Christian history. His personality, theology and philosophy have been the focus of countless studies and sermons. He has been influential in shaping Christian thought since the beginning of the Jesus Movement. Some people love him. Some are in awe of him. Some are confused by him and challenged by his teachings. Some are inspired. Some disagree with a few of his ideas. Whatever posterity's opinion of him, Paul's faith in Christ was singular. His devotion to sharing the gospel was unrelenting. He went into the unknown impassioned by his love of Christ and on fire for God. He got out of his comfort zone. He changed his life, devoting himself to preaching God's good news. He shared his experience with others. He helped people explore their own relationship with God. His life reminds us that God calls us all to share our faith with others. We may not be called to share our faith in exactly the same way that Paul did, but we are called nonetheless, to share the love we have for God with others. We are called to share the love we've found in God with others.

It's Labor Day Weekend and we are on the cusp of a new season, transitioning from summer to fall, from vacation to work/school. Change is in the air. And change is an opportunity for God to work in our lives. I invite you to take time, at the beginning of this new season, to think about God's presence in your life. How have you seen God's action in your life? Where and when have you experienced God's love, faithfulness and revelation? Maybe it wasn't a moment like Paul's conversion experience. But maybe it was in the love and support of friends. Maybe it was in the peace of watching a sunset. Maybe it was in the comfort of an answered prayer. God's faithfulness abounds, in Paul's life and in ours.

Share it with someone else. Spread that love and faithfulness with others that they may know and feel God's work in the world. Paul couldn't have known what a lasting impact his words would have on the Christian faith. Likewise, we can't know the kind of impact our words and actions have on others. So we are called to love as best we can, to share the Good News we know in Christ with others, and to help build up God's people, even as Paul himself did. May God empower us to do that very thing. Amen.