

WHEN CHRISTIANS HOLD POWER Acts 13:1-12

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on July 7, 2019, the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series on the Acts of the Apostles, entitled “When...”

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. But the magician Elymas (for that is the translation of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now listen—the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun.” Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord.

I.

A few paragraphs into last week’s sermon in our series on the Book of Acts, I said that this book recounts in dramatic fashion stories of early Christians who take the good news of the resurrection of Christ and the spiritual force, humanitarian idealism, promise of ultimate redemption found in that news and translate it into the world of facts and fancies, kings and empires, families and fortunes.

In today’s sermon, three days after we have celebrated the signing of the Declaration of Independence and hence the birth of our nation 233 years ago, around the idea – the idea, not race or soil – that all people are created equal, I want us to look at one scene in in which early Christians –in this case Paul and Barnabas – come into contact with a person who holds considerable political power in the Roman hierarchy of rulers. Looking at this story, I want us to consider what can happen when Christians live and work or at least come in contact with people who hold genuine political power.

The person in our story holding power is one Sergius Paulus, a Roman proconsul who rules in a city called Paphos, capital of the Isle of Cyprus, in the Mediterranean Sea. A proconsul is essentially a governor of a Roman territory. Such governors are normally appointed for one year. They administer the province and carried out the policies and laws the Roman Senate has enacted. They collect taxes from the province and deposit them in the Senate treasury.

In our passage, Sergius Paulus appears to have been in office from the years 46-48, a little over a decade after the death and resurrection of Christ. It was a period in which the news of the resurrection was spreading quickly beyond its origins in Jerusalem into the Greco-Roman world in which Sergius had received and exercised power.

As the story unfolds, Luke – who is the author of Acts – begins by providing the names of six apostles who make their way to Cyprus and encounter this Roman governor. These six turn out to be a more diverse lot than we contemporary readers might expect. They include:

- *Barnabas*, a Jew from *Cyprus*, who had embraced Christianity and become a close associate of Paul
- *Simeon* who was called *Niger*, likely a *dark-skinned African gentile* who had converted to Christianity and become a church leader
- *Lucius*, a Jew from *Cyrene*, who had also embraced Christianity
- *Manaen*, who had been brought up in *the court of King Herod*, familiar with the ins and outs of royal power in the Empire
- *John*, who is simply described as *one who assists*
- And the *Apostle Paul*, who in Jewish circles still goes by his Jewish name *Saul*, who had been converted on the Road to Damascus a few chapters earlier and who now begins what becomes the first of his three missionary journeys on behalf of the risen Christ.

It is an interesting mix: Three Jews; three gentiles. At least three different nations represented. At least two people from dark-skinned nations. One person brought up in the King's court. The element of diversity lacking is that there are no women in the mix; the existence of such leadership will be evident in the next section of the chapter.¹

In short order, these six cover five cities over two islands, ending at Paphos, the capital city of Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea,

Luke then picks up the narrative:

The entourage meets a certain magician, Simon Bar-Jesus, who is Jewish prophet, but a false prophet.

The magician has had an audience with the governor, Sergius Paulus.

It appears that what the governor has heard from the magician is troubling, confusing, even threatening, so the governor immediately summons Barnabas and Paul to hear what they have been preaching and teaching in the local synagogue.

A war of words ensues between the magician and Paul. The magician opposes Barnabas and Paul and tries to turn the governor away from the faith he is about to hear from them.

¹ See “the devout women of high standing” in 13:50.

Paul then looks intently at the magician and says:

‘You son of the devil,
You enemy of all righteousness,
Full of all deceit and villainy,
Will you not stop
Making *crooked* the *straight paths* of the Lord?

Those of us who know Luke and Isaiah recognize that in the intensity of this verbal warfare, Paul makes an ironic use of Scripture and subtly accuses the magician of reversing the promise of Isaiah found in the preaching of John the Baptist that the messiah who was coming would “make straight” the paths of the Lord and all that is “crooked shall be made straight as well.”²

But Paul doesn’t stop with highbrow literary illusions inserted into a war of words.

Listen [he says to the magician],
The hand of the Lord is against you,
And you will be blind for a while,
Unable to see the sun.

Having been himself blinded on the Road to Damascus,³ Paul knows a thing or two about not being able to see the sun, and about, as Frank Bruni, who is himself in danger of going blind, losing his, pointed out in *The New York Times* today,⁴ the redemptive power of imagination that can come to people – like Milton, like Paul, possibly like the Sergius Paulus – who become blind.

Luke then concludes by saying:

When the governor *saw* what had happened, he *believed*, for he was *astonished* at the teaching about the Lord.

Reading these words closely, it is hard to tell whether the governor believes because of the teaching of Paul and Barnabas or because of the blindness that comes upon the magician; but with this event, a Roman governor becomes an early *convert to* and *ally of* the new and burgeoning Christian movement as it spreads across the Greco-Roman world a few years after the death and resurrection of Christ.

II.

That’s the story. So what on earth can it mean to us? What does the story of a local governor who consults a newly minted visiting missionary about an encounter he has had with a magician have to do with us?

I believe it relates: just follow me along.

Every human being born on the face of the earth finds himself or herself living somewhere. We do not choose where we are born, nor in what era of history we enter the world. In this story, Saul was a Jew from Tarsus; Simon, from Niger; and the governor from Antioch.

² Luke 3:4-6; Isaiah 40.

³ Acts 9.

⁴ Frank Bruni, “Writing With Your Eyes Closed,” in *The New York Times* 7/6/2019.

You and I – for the most part – live in Alexandria or Arlington or Washington, DC. As such, we live in or near our nation’s capital.

- A few of us were *born* here and have lived here all our lives.
- Some of us have *moved* here to accompany a spouse, parents, adult children and their children, known affectionately as grandchildren.
- Some of us have been *assigned* here by the military branch in which we serve or the civilian service we have entered.
- Some of us have *sought to live* here – or someplace similar – all our lives and our being here represents the fulfillment of a personal goal and a personal achievement.
- Some of us are here under what we consider *duress*.
- Some of us feel we are *called* to be here, that whatever we sense of God’s purpose for our lives involves us being here.

Because we live here, we live at least *in* and *among* people who themselves *have* power within our nation or who have *access* to people who have such power. Though as I have long said of Westminster, *we are a congregation of people who work for household names and don’t want to be one*, the bottom line is that we are closer than *most* people in our country – and most of the Presbyterian variety – to people who *hold* power.

If for no other reason than osmosis, by virtue of where we live and by virtue of that to which we are exposed, we know more about the workings and dysfunction of our government – or at least we know more intimately and intently – than most people who have never lived here know. The knowledge we have acquired is one reason we feel mixed when we travel to the place we call home; and one reason people at home feel mixed about us when we arrive. They often treat us as the visiting strangers we have become.

Our knowledge, our exposure, our experience places a special burden on us not only to share the wisdom of our experience with those who would benefit from knowing a bit more about the ins and outs of our capital city; but also it provides us with a special opportunity to live out our faith – to the extent possible – to grow in our faith, and to bear witness to and from our faith to those whose trust we may have received who live near or hold power.

Like Paul and Barnabas, we may not have been reared in the King’s Court, but near the King’s Court is where we currently live; and that provides us with a unique perspective on our own faith and a unique opportunity to share our faith, seasoned by that perspective. Paul and Barnabas have that opportunity; they take it; and it has significant impact.

III.

Now this all sounds well and good, but most of us don't have a governor calling our cell phone to ask what our faith might say to an issue before the nation or even before the state over which he or she presides.

But there is a little gem in this story that illumines how we might bear witness to those who have power, even when we have little or none.

After Luke mentions four of the people who are accompanying Paul

- *Barnabas*
- *Simeon*
- *Lucius*
- *and Manaen*

He moves on to describe the route they are taking on their journey and the territory they are covering. Then, almost as an afterthought, Luke stops the car, puts it in reverse, and backs up to his list of those who accompany Paul. Luke interrupts his list of apostolic accomplishments and says:

And they had John also to assist them.

Who is John? He is often considered to be John Mark, or Mark the Evangelist, who wrote the Gospel of Mark. But for now, John seems rather obscure.⁵

- Maybe John is one of those people who simply doesn't have a face people remember, who doesn't light up a room he enters, someone you have to meet several times before remembering.
- Maybe John is the person standing alone in Fellowship Hall or Lemonade on the Lawn.
- Maybe John is the person whose name always gets left out of the bulletin; or, if it is included, it is mispronounced.

The truth is more of us are like John than like Paul or Barnabas. John we are, and John we *can* be proud to be, because John is important. "*The early disciples had John also to assist them.*"

- People like John *show* up.
- People like John are *there* when we need them.
- People like John do the work, sometimes in more *detail* than we are custom to doing, sometimes in more detail than we *know* how to do.
- People like John stuff envelopes at the headquarters of the campaign office and make those cold calls to phone numbers that may no longer exist or if they do may not want to hear from us.

⁵ See Mark 13:5n, in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

- People like John attend the town hall meetings and read the information ahead of time.
- People like John drive people to the polls or marches or both.
- People like John call the civics class to order and make sure – however much against their will – her students learn the basic functions of government.
- People like John take a child aside and explain what the child has just heard on cable television.

The apostles had John to assist them.

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Good people of Westminster, we don't have to hold power or be photographed next to those who do to bear witness to those in power, to live out our faith in the city in which those with power live and exercise the power they have.

We can be like John, proudly, confidently, because if this noble experiment in democracy will continue to work – with all the fits and starts it has – it will work because of people like us, people like John.

I for one am grateful that while writing a story about the powerful, Luke puts his car in reverse and notices John.

Amen.