



**October 6, 2013**

**Dr. George Pike**

I want to take a moment of personal privilege this morning, as this is most likely the last time I will preach here at Valley. I am most grateful to Larry for this opportunity to express my deep appreciation and heartfelt thanks to this congregation for the way I have been treated both as Interim Pastor twice, and as a pew sitter the rest of the time. My two interims here are among the most satisfying of my whole career and it is to you I give thanks for those wonderful times in my ministry. I can't help but think, this morning, of some of the things we accomplished during those times. The singing of "The Lord's Prayer" during communion; the noisy offering; the purchase of new hymnals; the fund raising, selection and purchase of the organ; the start of funding for the Spiritual Life Center, and, most of all, for the many friendships Pauline and I have developed here over the past 15 years. In any event, we leave Green Valley with very mixed emotions. We will be back occasionally, particularly for the Favorite Anthems concerts which is among the better ideas Kay and I had. I am glad that has continued and trust that it will continue far into the future.

Ephesians 4:1-6

Not only is this a special Sunday for me as a final opportunity to say thanks, but World Communion Sunday marks, in a very special way, our essential unity with Christians everywhere. In a very real sense, this table encompasses the world this morning. I think of just a few of the congregations with whom I have worshiped over the years. My position as co-director of the Bicentennial Fund of the Presbyterians Church USA, enabled me to worship in over 700 congregations, and visit mission around the world. For instance, with the Rices coming next week, I think of a new church development in what was then Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The building consisted of poles and palm fronds, the pews were bamboo poles supported by forked sticks driven into the dirt floor. Or of the Katoka Church in Kananga (where Rices live and work). I was taken to the church by the pastor, and as we entered the building where almost 1000 had gathered, he said to me: "By the way, George, you're preaching this morning!" I am convinced that the translation was far better than the sermon. It was longer anyway. Or I think of the Presbyterian Church in Barrow, Alaska with whom I worshiped on a World Communion Sunday some years ago. A congregation of 400, almost all Eskimos, it is the northernmost Presbyterian Church in the world, and the largest Eskimo congregation. Then I think of the Young Nak Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea, with over 64,000 members. I remember the congregation I

served as Interim in Kansas City, Missouri -Second Presbyterian Church with its beautiful stone gothic building and magnificent stained glass windows. We are one in the Spirit of Christ whether we are Orthodox, Pentecostal, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic...whether we meet in this beautiful sanctuary with its view of the majestic mountains and peaceful valley...or in a tiny white frame building in Atkasuk, Alaska out on the tundra 80 miles south of Barrow. The music that evening was two elderly Eskimo men, one played a mandolin and the other a musical saw. Our table this morning stretches, literally, around the world as we join to break bread and share the cup together.

In our scripture, Paul, the first truly ecumenical Christian, stands before Agrippa, caught in the machinery of Roman law, to tell his personal story- how in the course of his days and years he met Jesus- and became a different man with a different mission. Thus Paul writes to the Ephesians: "This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." So on this Sunday when we join with Christians around the world, let me say, first of all that

## **I. PAUL IS CAPTIVE TO CHRIST'S POWER**

Paul is a prisoner, probably in Rome awaiting trial before Nero. He had been arrested in Jerusalem for disturbing the peace of the Empire by teaching things contrary to Jewish law. A riot resulted and Paul would probably have been killed were it not for the soldiers of the Roman garrison who rescued him. He had been arrested on complaint of the Jewish religious authorities. But being a Roman citizen, he appealed his case, and was brought at last to Rome where he now finds himself under house arrest awaiting his appearance before the emperor himself. No dungeon, no bread and water diet; but a prisoner nonetheless, constantly under the guard of Roman soldiers. If Paul were to escape, the guard would pay with his life. Strange then, that in these circumstances, Paul does not call himself a prisoner of Rome, but rather the prisoner of Jesus Christ.

It's all in the point of view. Paul does not see himself as the victim of circumstances...he does not complain or cite "the slings and anows of outrageous fortune." He does not wring his hands and say, "If only I'd have stayed away from Jerusalem"... "if only I'd been a bit more moderate in language."... "if only I'd have cooperated a bit more with the authorities." He is not a man wandering through the world hoping for the best, but rather a man with a mission...a man under orders...a man committed to a vision...a man held in the power of a loyalty far more important

than his own life.

But how about us, how about you and me? Do we go wandering through the world hoping for the best, but expecting the worst? Hoping our health will hold out? Hoping our marriage will hold together? Hoping our kids, even our grown ones, will make it from Monday to Friday? Hoping for acceptance? Hoping retirement will be more than shuffleboard or pickle ball or golf...more than aches and pains and endless trips to the doctor. Hoping against hope that terrorism doesn't rear its ugly head again. Hoping that congress will finally get its act together.

Where is Jesus Christ in all this? His strength...His presence...His vision of the kingdom of God...His care for the least and the lost and the lonely? Where does the story of Jesus address our deepest fears and speak to our deepest hopes? Do you feel yourself captive...captive to Christ's power? Paul certainly did.

In the second place, Paul shows that he is...

## **II Responsive to Christ's Command**

The command to which Paul responded is the command Paul received at his conversion. You know the story! Diane told it to the kids a couple of weeks ago. The Risen Christ appeared to Paul on that famous Damascus Road experience and said about him:..."he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel"

We read and hear that commission from the viewpoint of 2000 years of history. But it was not as simple as it, at first glance, appears to be. It required Paul to move against everything he knew and felt about the Gentile world.

Who were the Gentiles? It's easy to say any non-Jew, but it was much more than that. They were the Romans who held Israel in bondage...they were the Greeks who worshiped idols...they were the people of the whole Mediterranean world that seemed to care for nothing but sensuality and violence. In Jesus' day and Paul's day the whole broad conservative wing of Judaism prayed for (and many worked for) the destruction of the Gentiles, looking for the angels of God to join them in one great battle that would end Gentile domination of Israel. "The War Scrolls" discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran drew up specific plans for just

such a battle.

In light of this, what courage Paul demonstrated...what strength of mind and will...what breadth of spirit,...and what responsiveness to Christ's command...to proclaim boldly and publicly that Gentiles, as well as Jews, were loved by God and called to share equally in the gospel. Amazing...radical...it caused a lot of trouble because it was such a radical departure from tradition. The Gospel of Jesus was universal!

And not all the Apostles agreed with Paul. Conflict arose, particularly between Peter and Paul. Peter, the Apostle whom Jesus called "the Rock", was head of the Jerusalem Council, and therefore head of the emerging Christian movement. It was this council that sent Paul on his missionary journeys. Paul and his companions Silas or Bamabus were to go to the Jewish communities in Asia Minor to tell the story of Jesus. But the reality was that the Gentiles responded more readily to the Gospel so that churches - largely Gentile -took root and grew, prospered and multiplied. Paul came quickly to recognize that God was calling Gentiles to faith in the Messiah, and when he returned to Jerusalem and reported this fact to Peter and the council, they were chagrined...upset.

To make a long story short, after a great deal of consternation and argument, the question was finally settled. The Christian story...the gospel...was for everybody! **It** was a radical departure from traditional belief. **It** was at this point that first century Christianity recognized that Jesus Christ was universal.

By the time the Gospel of John was written, probably about 90 AD, this universality was accepted and reflected in John's memorable statement:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone...Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, young and old...everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life!"

Paul first discovered what the Church has known, though not always practiced, but nevertheless has known through the centuries since...the appeal of Jesus is universal.

This came home to me some years ago as I attended a meeting of a group of international Christian leaders in Potsdam, then East Germany. We spoke different languages...the color of our skin was different...we came from different cultural



back grounds...even our dress was different. But the 47 of us together, in probably 20 different languages, could and did pray the Lord's Prayer. Though our theology may differ, though our cultures differ...all of us believe that Jesus Christ is Lord.

At the heart of the Jesus story, there is one inescapable kernel of truth. It is this: God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus to die for each of us and for all of us. In his resurrection, God overcame the power of death, and has promised eternal life.

This is the Christian story.. What we do with it is our story!

George H. Pike  
Ephesians 4:1-6