

Message: Acts 21:18-26: To Jerusalem IV: With James

Introduction:

Well, friends.

Two weeks ago Rudy walked us through the last leg of Paul's roundabout journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem. Today we pay attention as he arrives.

Luke wants to do a couple of things in today's passage. First of all, he just wants to tell us the story he's been telling us. I mean, we spent like three weeks talking about Paul getting to Jerusalem; we should wonder what happens when he finally gets there. Luke's going to let us know.

And just like Jesus uses his entry into Jerusalem to teach about himself, Luke is going to use Paul's entry into Jerusalem to teach us about the Church and Paul and what God's doing with them. And we have to pay attention, because Luke lays out important themes here that will characterize Paul's entire time in Jerusalem. What we notice today, can't help but see, is the tension-filled place of the Jewish Church. They're

culturally Jewish, but religiously, they're this new thing. Christian. And the tensions of their situation overwhelm the Church's relationship with their religiously-Jewish community.

What we see today is Paul navigating the difficult place that the Jewish Church is navigating, as both try to be faithful in the ways they understand faithfulness to God. Ultimately, Paul won't be able to really satisfy anyone, but that doesn't happen for a few chapters. Today, he enters Jerusalem, is greeted warmly, as we read last week, and Luke sets us up for what's to come.

Let's pray that God will give us each and all something useful, something good, from what we read here.

Prayer:

Remember What's Happening:

Keep in mind: It has been years, now, since Gentiles were welcomed into the Church. And it's been settled just how Jewish those Gentiles have to be. That doesn't mean that there's no disagreement, still between the Jewish and the Gentile parts of the Church, of course. There are two poles to Christianity;

the Jewish one, headquartered in Jerusalem, and the Gentile one, helmed by Antioch, although Corinth is growing in importance. And this isn't Paul's first time meeting in Jerusalem with the leaders of the Church, there. A small note was made by Luke about the way Paul and some others took up a special donation to give to the Church in Jerusalem in anticipation of a famine that a prophet told them would hit the world. Paul roamed around after that, sent by the Spirit and Antioch. We saw in Acts 15 and 16 as the Jerusalem Church decided in a Spirit-guided consensus process just how much of the Law, Torah, was appropriate for Gentiles to follow if they were going to follow Jesus. Paul headed out with Silas to tell everyone about it, and planted congregations all around--Phillipi, Athens, Corinth--and now he's back. And as we read a couple of weeks ago, "The brothers and sisters received them warmly." People are happy they're back.

And Paul goes to those who he earlier gave testimony to.

Official Update:

18 The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. 19

Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 When they heard this, they praised God.

This is great, right? Paul's been gone for a few years, and while the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem-- because they are the Church's leaders, no matter how much influence Antioch has--while they've certainly heard about things happening in the Gentile world, Paul was the one they dispatched to go out there and tell the Gentiles just how Jewish they need to be to follow Jesus. Jerusalem is getting the official update right now. And it's a good one. They praise God for it, authentically and genuinely.

Problem

But there's a problem, now, and it's a problem that Paul's presence causes.

Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. 21 They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their

children or live according to our customs.

22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, 23 so do what we tell you.

The Church elders, it's leaders, have a problem. "What shall we do?" is a good question. They've come up with a solution. We'll get to it in a second.

Remember, the Jerusalem Church is huge, now. They've pooled their belongings, and share in a largely communal lifestyle, and have survived famine on account of the generosity of the Church far away from them. They care for widows and orphans, gather at the Temple every day, and culturally, they are in every single way Jewish.

But Paul's presence causes problems. People have at best been worried and suspicious about Paul, and at worst downright hostile toward him. And what they've been worried about is this great rumor that Paul allows Jewish Christians to no longer be Jewish.

Problem: The rumor is kinda true.

The problem is that this is true, from one perspective. On the one hand, as far as Paul is concerned, there is a

radical difference between being culturally Jewish and religiously Jewish. That is, to live up to the human part of God's covenant with people doesn't require Jewish blood, it doesn't require Jewish culture, it requires only on top of trusting Jesus, that which the Church has already said it requires, a few basic things that we've already seen in Acts and we'll hear again in a second. Paul will not budge on the idea that you don't need to be Jewish to be faithful to Jesus. You don't need to keep Torah to be faithful to Jesus. The Spirit has fallen on the uncircumcised, the Gentiles, and that isn't something you can undo.

For Paul, there is a clear sense of what is a religious act and what is a cultural act. I don't know what that line is, and I've spent time trying to piece apart Paul's arguments in the many letters he's written. And part of this is because for Paul intention does matter. If we are trying to earn God's mercy by taking up religious activity instead of trusting that Jesus has earned us all the mercy we need, and it's Jesus we're meant to trust, Paul has no qualms shutting us down. But if we have an overly-sensitive conscience, and have done something our entire lives in a Jewish way, and just can't embrace the idea that God could welcome us doing something else, he's not going to push. Paul is

both more dogmatic and more pastoral than I am.

Problem: Solution:

So there's this problem, this rumor about what Paul is promoting to Jewish people way out there in Gentile land. And the Jerusalem leaders have an idea for a solution to quell the rumors. They say:

There are four men with us who have made a vow. 24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. 25 As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

The Church's leaders make their intentions clear, here. They want Paul to do as they ask as proof "that he himself is living in obedience to the law." They want Paul to do this as a proof that he keeps Torah.

And this is tricky, for me, to get my head around.

Because Paul does this. We read:

26 The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

Solution: Is this okay?

Paul has incredibly strong words to say about people who think that living a religiously Jewish life, that is, following Torah, will make them acceptable to God or have some salvific effect in their lives apart from Jesus' own faithfulness. He's dogmatic about it. Outside trusting Jesus, there is no way to be counted faithful to God's covenant.

And yet, we read things like this, and I at least, wonder: "Man. Is Paul a hypocrite? Because it seems like he's a hypocrite." Paul may keep Torah, but he doesn't keep Torah because he thinks it gains him God's favor. At least, right here, he's keeping Torah specifically to chill people out. But this whole vow-keeping and offering thing...it reads as very religious, not cultural, to me.

And I really struggled--okay, I mentally struggled--with what to do here, how to make sense of what Paul does here.

In the end, here is where I land: I'm shocked at my own entitled sense of thinking I get to decide, for Paul, what is and isn't considered religious and what is and isn't considered cultural. It is remarkable that I think I get to decide for Paul if what he did was wrong, remarkable that I think it's my job to either defend or convict him in this choice he makes.

Paul, who was Jewish, seems okay with this. It doesn't seem like, to him, this was something he had to avoid. So if it was okay with Paul, and he was the best insider when it came to his own perspective, his own theology, and his own convictions, which my entire trust in God has been shaped by, why is it I want to pull him aside and give him a talking to about what faithful Christians do and don't do?

And the reason is because I think I know better. And why do I think I know better? Because I'm a well-educated, middle-class white guy, who spreads my opinions on everything around as if I have a license from God to do it. But I don't.

Now, that's me; I don't know why any one of us might think about what Paul does here, or if we think we get to decide whether what he did was right or wrong.

Paul wrote the very letters, created the source documents and the theological framework, that some of us might want to use to condemn his own behavior. But he was okay with this very religious-y thing. I don't think he was a hypocrite; I think we don't have the native, nuanced perspective he had, and it takes more than we're willing to give to get close to it.

So what?

Should we dismiss Paul as a hypocrite? Someone who here keeps Torah, but who writes elsewhere that all his achievements in Torah-keeping he considers "garbage, that [he] may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law, but that which is through [the faithfulness of] Christ."

Or should we celebrate Paul as a pragmatists, someone who has a native and personal sense of what he can and can't do as he fulfills God's task on his life. After all, he writes, elsewhere, "To those under the law

I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law...so as to win those not having the law...I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

You decide! Hypocrite or pragmatist. I don't care. I'm in the latter camp. I think Paul is so focused on God, that he'll open himself up to charges of hypocrisy from those who don't understand what he understands, people like me, because he doesn't have anything to prove to me. Instead, he has the integrity of this dual-culture Church to protect, and he's going to protect it.

There are things to think about from this passage, though.

Condemning Paul:

Ultimately, I don't get to speak for people who I am not like. I can be with them in solidarity, but I don't get to decide if Paul was right or wrong here. I am not in the place he was, of the people or time or situation he was. And yet I tend, because our society has

positioned me to, to think that my “hot take” is the right one, my opinion correct. Everything about our world urges me to share what I believe about whatever it is I hear.

No matter how imaginative I am, how creative I am, or how well-read I am, I don't have a first-hand experience of another person's situation. Particularly that person's situation in a complex time. I will make assumptions and presumptions when I hear about what another person does; it's what people do. But if we have the Spirit alive in us, we also have the capacity to check our assumptions against grace, and see how lacking they nearly always are.

I'm not tossing up my hands, and saying nothing is objective, but I am saying that when it comes to Paul's particular choice in his particular life in this particular moment in the Church's history, I don't get to say Paul was a hypocrite. I can only say that I don't know all he knew.

But there may be, in our lives today, similar situations, where we have to say, “I don't know what that person knows.” The real problem today is that I don't know Paul's intentions; I only know the intentions of those

who offered this solution. And judging another person's intentions, without being able to ask the person about them, is a highway to hell.

What do you think of what Paul did here? It may not matter at all for the choices you make today, and I'm okay with that. But do we get that none of us in this room have the right to condemn him?

Judging Faithlessness:

We will and I hope do all the time interact with people who come from other cultures that are tightly tied to particular religions or religious groups. We will interact with people who come from other cultures that in our minds or in reality are tightly tied to particular religions or religious groups. When we see this or that person we've come to know do this or that thing, a thing that we think of as "religious," I don't think we're allowed to judge them as "faithful" or "faithless" until at least we've asked them for their perspective.

We've got to check ourselves when we make assumptions about other people's behavior in this area. Just flipping this around, consider how many people around us, who are just like us, do things that anyone from far away could be called super religious:

Give presents on Christmas and go to a Christmas Eve Service, say, or close their bar down on Sundays, or have their weddings in a church building, things that for most people are just cultural traditions, and have nothing to do with Christianity. We can recognize that difference because we're close; those who aren't, can't.

When we see this or that person we've come to know do this or that thing, a thing that we think of as "religious," I don't think we're allowed to judge them as "faithful" or "faithless" until at least we've asked them for their perspective. Let's ask them for their perspective, and not judge lest we ourselves be judged.

Ultimately: Asking!

Ultimately, I'm led to a very simple conclusion for all we see today, which is simply that if we have the chance to understand why a person does what they do, let's take it.

We're generally only interested in why people do what they do when we think they're wrong for doing it. Let's ask, instead of judge them. If we've got the chance to learn why a person is making the choice they are

making, doing the thing they're doing, participating in the event they're participating in, let's ask. Let's ask before we become hypocrites because we're the ones judging them, while demanding no one judge us.

Paul, frankly, risked being judged a hypocrite in his effort to keep the unity of the Church. If we are going to be considered a hypocrite, let's at least do it for good reasons, like his. Let's not give into our prejudices, our assumptions, our presumptions, about what motivates people, but let's ask them. The next time we find ourselves talking about someone's motivation or intention or character because of something we've seen or heard in them, let's stop it. Not only are we mostly adults, but we've also got the Holy Spirit.

We of all people should be able to reject our inclination to condemn people for their behavior without finding out why they do what they do. Let's not spread stereotypes, or condemn individuals, but approach them, learn from them, and whatever follows from there, well: I dunno. But if we haven't done that step, and we judge another without knowing their motivations, then we're hypocrites of the worst sort. And I know, because I know our intentions, that's not

what we want to be.