

“Pioneer and Perfecter”

Hebrews 11.29 – 12.2

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 29 August 2007

Paul of Tarsus was arguably the most important figure in Christian history: without him Jesus might have been no more than a footnote in the history of first-century Judaism. And it’s vital to see both Jesus and Paul within the context of Judaism.

Jesus was not a Christian. He was born a Jew, observed Jewish law and rite his entire life, and he died as a Jew at the hands of Roman imperialism. Yes, he did tell some head-turning stories about non-Jews (like the one about the *Good Samaritan*, which he told to a group of people who probably thought the only *good Samaritan* was a *dead Samaritan*). And he did engage some non-Jews, like the Syro-Phoenician woman, whose faithfulness he recognized, and the Centurion, whose daughter he healed in response to the Roman’s faithfulness. But, his disciples were all Jews. He spoke using the linguistic style of a rabbi, used allusions that were common to his Jewish homeland. Here’s the clincher: he didn’t intend to start a new religion, but rather sought to reform what he saw going on in the system of Temple Judaism. (That’s something that eventually happened, as the tradition shifted away from Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, and really pushed the rise of Rabbinic Judaism.)

Last week I was talking with my sister, Susan, about some striking similarities between Jesus and the Buddha. Jesus was born into Judaism, and the Buddha was born into Hinduism. Jesus was not out to be worshipped, and the Buddha wanted no one to consider him a God. Both left a body of teachings that are remarkably similar to one another: written within their own religious context, but speaking truths that are deemed universal across many cultures. As Marcus Borg said, if Jesus and the Buddha were ever to meet each other, “neither would try to convert the other – not because they would regard such an effort as hopeless, but because they would recognize one another.”¹

It was Paul – a Jew who had been born in what we know as Turkey – to bring the Jewishness of Jesus and his message to the Gentile world. The Jesus movement that Paul first encountered (and prosecuted) was a sect within Judaism, not a separate religion. And after his own conversion experience on the road to Damascus, Paul’s first stop in each community was the synagogue, where he hoped the Jews and “God-fearers” (Gentiles attracted to Judaism) would be open to Jesus’ new spin on the old religion. In the process of reaching out to Gentiles, Paul opened the richness of Jewish faith and relationship with the Jewish God to people who were not “chosen.” He brought it from particularity and even tribalism into the realm of universalism. And that is one of the key factors that has enabled Christianity to become the world’s largest religion. In many ways, Paul was the first Christian.

Paul says that for those who are “in Christ” there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. He denies that circumcision and observance of the kosher laws are essential to being a follower of Christ. And it is probably Paul who is responsible for the fact that I and my European ancestors are not worshipping trees or Wotan or Thor.

But this letter, to the Hebrews, is not directed at Gentiles, but rather at Paul’s own Jewish brethren. The litany is one of deeds of Jewish faithfulness. And he sketches some of the macro-stories of the Hebrew scriptures in narrative:

“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea...

By faith the walls of Jericho fell...

¹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus and Buddha: Parallel Sayings*. (Berkeley: Ulysses, 2002), p. 8.

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish.”

Paul uses the Greek noun *pistis* – faith – to describe these and other acts of trust. It is the root of the verb *pisteuo*, which is often translated to English as believe, which is unfortunate, because it isn't about a cognitive choice of assent, but rather about throwing your arms around someone and giving them your full trust. It's trusting God ...that the waters of the Red Sea aren't going to rush in on you, ...that your trumpeting around the walls of Jericho will bring them down, ...and that cooperating as a spy with the people of God will safeguard you. It's all about trust.



Paul's litany is a short summary of the Hebrew scriptures, and those stories still apply to us, as well. But, if Paul were writing today...if he were writing a letter to Plymouth...to you...what kind of litany would he put together? What acts of faithfulness and trust are a part of our history? Perhaps he would write to you of our Plymouth Pilgrim ancestors venturing forth on the Mayflower or the Congregational Church in Torrington, Connecticut, ordaining an African-American in 1785 or a Congregational Church in New York ordaining a woman in 1856. Would Paul write about Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich – two giants of 20th century theology who both called the UCC their home? Maybe he would even commend our denomination's courage in declaring ourselves Open and Affirming over 20 years ago and taking a stand in favor of same-sex marriage two years ago.

If Paul were writing to Plymouth, what acts of faith would stand out? Would he describe the *Volgadeutsch* farmers who started this church 104 years ago? Or their grandchildren who dared to move the church from Old Town clear down south to our current location on Prospect Road? Perhaps he would describe the way Fred Edmonds' ministry here shifted the congregation to care deeply about civil rights issues and engagement of social justice concerns.

And if Paul were writing to *you*, about people in *your own* life who have been faithful, whose story would he tell? A grandmother who stood up for women's rights? A father who not only taught the faith to his children, but lived that faith through tangible acts of compassion? Maybe a Sunday school teacher who was a leader in industry, but who made time to teach Sunday School each week. A friend who learned to forgive even the most grievous offense?

I'm going to give you a little homework (which you may choose to do or to skip...there is not quiz next Sunday): take 15 minutes of quiet sometime this week and think about the people in your life who have demonstrated a sense of faithfulness. Remember them and the ways they shaped you. And then jot down your own litany of saints...you own great cloud of witnesses.



I've always liked the way Paul describes Jesus as “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” One of the things I haven't thought about until recently is that since he is writing to Jewish Christians and he himself is a Jewish Christian, when he mentions “our faith,” is he talking about Judaism? *Pioneer* conjures all kinds of images from Daniel Boone to Captain Kirk, and I'm not sure that our American ears hear that word quite the same way a Greek speaker would hear *archegos*, which not only means *pioneer*, but *originator*, and also *chief leader*. Is Paul talking about Jesus as the head of a new school of Judaism – somewhat akin to the current Jewish Renewal Movement? Or is he referring to being the originator of a whole new religion? Given that he links pioneer with perfecter, I think

Paul is calling Jesus the pioneer of a new school of Judaic thought and practice and the culmination of Judaism. For Paul, that is who Jesus was.

While the writer of John's gospel says that Jesus the *logos* was present at the creation of the cosmos, and quotes Jesus as saying "The Father and I are one,"² Paul's Christology – his ideas about Jesus – are somewhat different. Paul says that Jesus attained a position of honor after a humiliating death on the cross; now he is seated "at the right hand of the throne of God." Paul's Jesus is human, is resurrected, and is in the closest possible relationship with God.

Your ideas about the historical Jesus and the resurrected Christ are probably different from the person sitting next to you. In our tradition, we affirm both the man of Nazareth and the Risen Christ. We affirm the ancient creeds as testimonies of faith not as tests of faith, when we say that Jesus was fully human and fully divine.

That may not sit well with some of you, who would like the rest of the congregation to agree with you. But, I'd ask you to take a moment and worry less about orthodoxy (or right belief) and concern yourself more with being moved by and having your life shaped by the one who is "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Most of you can get your head, and your heart, around Jesus. And perhaps you embrace the mystery of the risen Christ as part of the Godhead. Yet, I suspect that all of us, as the baseline view of Christian thought and practice, can see Jesus as "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

For two millennia, followers of Jesus have been trying to discern and understand what was so incredibly unique about the essence of the One we follow. And it will remain a mystery as we – all of us – join the cloud of witnesses who "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Amen.

² Jn 10.30