**Acts 26:19-29** April 11, 2021

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Easter 2

*Acts 26:19[Paul said,] “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. 21That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. 22But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—23that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”*

*24At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”*

*25“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. 26The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 27King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”*

*28Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”*

*29Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Everything but the Chains!**

Today’s reading from God’s word is a gem. We’ll get to it in just a minute. Like most gems, it doesn’t lie around out in the open for just anyone to find it. It’s hidden away in the third last chapter of Acts, chapter 26. It’s an event from the Bible, when Pete Gurney read the first reading this morning, you probably thought, “I’ve ever heard this one before!” Even if you read your Bible often—as I would encourage you to do—this is definitely one of the less familiar passages.

Well, gems not only need to be found, they also need to be cleaned up or they look like just another piece of gravel. They need to be cut and polished and put in a setting that shows them off. This reading requires the same. It requires context because our reading drops us into the middle of a courtroom. Without context, we wonder what is going on. We are left to guess what the charges are, who the judge is, what the possible outcomes could mean. We will best appreciate this reading if we know what we are looking at.

In the reading, we encounter three people: Paul, the devout Christian apostle most of you are very familiar with; Festus, a newly appointed Roman governor, whom you are not so well acquainted with; and the almost as obscure King Agrippa II who is the king of a Roman territory neighboring Governor Festus’ province. To sum up, what we have here is one Christian prisoner and two decent, but unbelieving, men of power.

Paul is the main speaker. When this takes place, Paul is past middle age. He has been a Christian for more than twenty years, a veteran missionary of several tours of duty. He has the scars to prove it. He has spoken before thousands: sometimes to crowds, sometimes to audiences of one. Day and night, he has labored for Christ’s kingdom. After Jesus Christ himself, this one whom we often call the Apostle Paul, is universally regarded as the most influential individual in the Christian faith. And one more thought to keep in mind: At the time of our reading, this energetic witness for Christ has been cooling his heals in prison for two years on baseless charges.

The second man, Festus, Roman governor of Palestine, just got off the ship from Rome three weeks previous. Paul had been held over as a prisoner from the previous governor. Festus wanted Paul off his hands. So, he was about to send Paul to a higher court, to the very court of Caesar in Rome, but before that, Governor Festus had to outline the charges against Paul. Here he was at a loss because he knew almost nothing about the Jewish faith and less about Christian beliefs. Which is what the whole case is about: religious matters, the conflict between Judaism and early Christianity. Festus is looking for direction. That’s where King Agrippa comes in.

The day before our reading King Agrippa arrived in town on a courtesy visit to the new governor. Behind closed doors Festus expressed his new-governor aggravation over the case of Paul when he said to King Agrippa, *“[Paul’s accusers] had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters.”* To Festus this is so weird and strange that he doesn’t know where to start. So he hoped that King Agrippa, who was himself a Jew and knew something of the Christians, could help. Agrippa agreed to listen and to help.

That is where our reading is, and now we admire this little gem again:

***(Read the Text: Acts 26:19-29)***

That last sentence is just pure gold: ***“I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”*** Let me paraphrase that last sentence. We’ll come back to the original, but for the moment, let me slightly alter it and apply it to our own aspirations. *“I pray God that [you might become what I am…except for the bad stuff.]”* That almost sounds corny, except it is the truth. Isn’t that what we wish for other people at our best moments? Isn’t that what we wish for those who come after us? Isn’t that what parents wish for their children, teachers for their students, pastors for their parishioners, Christians for non-Christians.

We wish we could bottle up and pass on to all around us all the good we love about life: playing board games with friends, the warmth of the summer sun on the deck of the swimming pool, the taste of the family secret bar-b-que, the tug of the fishing line when a big one takes the bait, the comfort of the resurrection at a funeral – We wish that for others. We wish they could know those joys that can’t be explained, that just have to be lived. And we wish something else for them: we wish that even as they experience the best we have found in life, we wish they would never encounter the worst that we had to go through: that feeling of helplessness before a bully twice your weight and three times your strength; the humiliation of publicly making a fool of yourself; the harassing calls from debt collectors We wish we could hand off all the good to them and somehow not hand them any of the bad. That’s Paul’s wish for Festus and Agrippa.

As Paul wishes his judges well, let’s think about the situation. What hung in the balance for Paul at this moment? He had been in prison for two years. These two guys to whom he is talking are the two who hold his future in their hands. He could plead with them. He could bargain with them. He could point out the injustices he has suffered (which he does, but only in passing!). He could even bribe them—not that he would. He is about to be shipped of to Rome for a future trial date. And if you want to know the rest of the story, he will soon get on a boat for the 2,000 mile voyage to Rome. It will get caught in a storm and sink and he and the rest of the sailors, soldiers and prisoners will be shipwrecked for three months on an island in the Mediterranean winter. Then Paul will finally get to Rome where he will be under arrest *for another two years* before his case is finally heard in the imperial court.

You think of all that, and you just want to shake Paul. “Paul, don’t you get it? These guys have the power of life and death! The choice of freedom or prison! That’s nice of you to be concerned about them and all, but you’ve got to think of yourself! You need to get out and to the freedom you deserve!”

And then you back off in admiration, “Yet you stand there before them, giving one of the best testimonies of the Christian faith ever spoken. You do it without speaking ill of them, or even of your rights as a prisoner. You just talk about Jesus.” You look at Paul as a Christian—not him as a Christian, but you as a Christian—and you think to yourself, “I want what Paul has.” You begin to realize that Paul looks beyond everything that surrounds him. He sees, believes and lives the big picture for himself and for others.

He has so much. He has peace, even though he is wrongly imprisoned. He has confidence even though he stands before those much greater than himself. He has joy that isn’t measured by waking up in a comfortable bed in a nice house with a fancy car in the driveway, but in the contentment he feels even in the worst surroundings. He has love and concern for others even when he suffers greatly. Even when the governor shouts at him in frustration, ***“You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane.”*** Paul still addresses him as, ***“Most Excellent Festus.”*** His confidence is not shaken in the least. When King Agrippa condescendingly tells him, ***“Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”*** Paul does not miss a beat. He tells Agrippa that even though he is king, he will have so much more if he would just listen to the message about Jesus.

If King Agrippa doesn’t want it, then yes, I, except for the chains, I want what Paul has. Or if I really have what Paul has, maybe the chains won’t even matter. Maybe the gift will be so great, the presence of God so tangible that things like imprisonment really will be no more annoyance to my life than a mild case of indigestion—which is about how much discomfort imprisonment seems to cause Paul.

What is this mysterious gift that Paul has which transcends all the bad that this world can dish out? He explained in verses 22 and 23, ***“I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”***

It comes down to Jesus. It always does for Paul.

Paul never never never got so caught up in the “practical” that he forgot about Jesus. Oh, sure, read the Bible. It talks about lots of things: hard work, helping the poor, godly speech, respectable dress, marriage, racial issues, LGTBT issues, employer/ employee relationships, honoring authority, gossip, and everything else about life. It’s all in there. But those so-called practical issues are always always always wrapped around the core of Jesus, the Christ, the chosen one of God, our Savior. Read it and find out. It’s all wrapped up in the one who had to suffer and die for all the sins you, I and everyone else have ever done. All those practical issues are wrapped up in the one who had to satisfy the aggrieved laws of God through being punished one time for all people on the cross at Calvary.

And, it is all wrapped up in the one who is ***“the first to rise from the dead.”*** (Those are the two things Paul talks about as the core of Jesus: that he had to suffer and to rise.) While Christ Jesus’ suffering and death was something he alone did and no one else need ever experience, his resurrection from the dead to glory is the first of all who believe. He has taken out the bad, and handed forward the good!

This is Paul’s confidence while on trial, in a prison, shipwrecked on an island or anywhere else. It is God’s will for every single person.

I going to take you out of the Bible to anotheng scene.

Imagine a this generic bar scene in a movie. (“Oh, but pastor, you can’t bring a bar scene, especially not one from the movies, into your sermon.” I understand. Just give me a minute. And this isn’t a joke, I’m being serious here.) So, a guy walks into the bar down on his luck. The bartender asks him, “So what’ll you have?” The hard luck guy is kind of at a loss. He’s not even sure why he’s there, so he looks down the bar at smartly dressed man who’s laughing and having a good time. The down-on-his-luck guy gives him a long hard look and says, “You know what he’s got? I’ll have one of those.” He’s thinking, “Who knows? Maybe if I have the same thing that guy’s having, maybe some of his good luck will rub off on me.”

Change scenes again, from a barroom to a courtroom. Before the judge you see Paul, shackled. You listen to him speak, listen to the hope he has, the confidence he has, the joy he has. You give him a long hard look and say, “I’ll have one of whatever he’s having.” And Paul rattles his chains and smiles at you and says, “What I’m having? That’s my prayer for you, in Jesus. Everything I have**—Everything but the chains!”**

And it’s like he doesn’t even have chains on! Amen.