

Bridge Builders!

Acts 21: 17-40

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Not a good idea! Paul was most hated in Jerusalem. People were extremely angry and they wanted to kill him. Yet, this was the place where Paul was going. Every one of Paul's supporters was on Paul's case. They said to him not to go because it was too dangerous. They said that there are plenty of other places he could go and promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ without such an unnecessary risk! They pleaded with him not to go to the place where the people were most hostile. Paul's response was beautiful in that he said that the issue in Jerusalem was not what they would do to him, but what Jesus would accomplish through him because of Paul's obedience (Verse 13).

Paul's response was incredible! Does this kind of response attract you? Paul listened to his peers, but Paul was beyond peer pressure. There was something more important to him that took centre stage.

Paul arrives and expresses thanks! Against the well-meaning advice of his supporters, Paul and his travelling mates arrived in Jerusalem received by other disciples of Jesus. Paul immediately said in gratitude, "the brothers welcomed us warmly (verse 17)." This seems like a small thing, but Paul saw it as so important that he commented on it. This was an important start because things were going to change.

The Bridge of communication: Paul was a bridge builder for humanity. His goal was to build and strengthen relationships with those he was mentoring and to build relationships with those who were opposing him. He knew that one builds relationships based on what they have in common with one another. On this journey to Jerusalem, he started with those he was mentoring by communicating everything in detail. In verse 19, he explained what God had done through him among the Gentiles. He took the time to explain, and the brothers in Christ in Jerusalem praised God for the missionary work Paul was able to accomplish through Christ!

The Meeting House Church in Burlington (Brethren in Christ – Anabaptist) has been engaged in a three part series, "Isis, Islam and Jesus". They are asking the question: How are we to respond? How would Jesus want us to respond? The Brethren in Christ denomination has Mennonite roots and is a church which seeks to be a pacifist in its approach to a life in Christ. The lead Pastor, Bruxy Cavey, conducted an interview with a Muslim man, Sadat Anwar who is very knowledgeable in Islam and active in his mosque in Toronto. The interview occurred on November 9, 2014 (a YouTube video). Pastor Cavey stated that the purpose of the meeting was to express views held in common, and differing views in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of what each believes and how Christians

and Muslims can come to a better understanding of how to respond to the Isis threat. Building the bridge of communication is key to connecting with our neighbour.

The Bridge of empathy: Paul understood how difficult it was for the Jews to accept the fact that salvation does not come from keeping the law. It was revealed to Paul on the road to Damascus, that salvation comes by God alone through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In genuine empathy to the people's fear, Paul agreed to go through the purification rites with four men, to visibly show to them and others, who were not clear of the importance of the law of Moses, to see that even to Paul, the law was still very important to his faith in Jesus. Paul was willing to do this to strengthen the connection with these people!

Building a bridge with those who oppose: Paul was accused of teaching against the law of Moses, and bringing Gentiles into the temple--which was forbidden! One can understand the opposition! During the 'Walk through the Bible' study this week, someone said that the Jews had believed in a certain way to salvation all their lives, and now this man 'pulls out the rug' from under them. Would you not be upset if someone started saying that a fundamental to what you believed for so many years was no longer true? At the very least, you would be shocked and need time to process before you knew how to proceed. Paul came in with his eyes open (so to speak) realizing he would get significant opposition. He knew that it would get worse before it got better, but did let that stop him. He wanted to build connections - a bridge by starting on what they had in common and proceeding from there.

The Bridge of confidence: In Acts 21: 6, Paul prayed before he left on the boat on his journey toward Jerusalem. The prayer here is important. Later when he entered the temple he also would be praying. Henri Nouwen said that prayer is 'the bridge between our conscious and unconscious lives. He said there is a 'large abyss' between our thoughts words and actions. Prayer connects these sides of our lives and connects us to God. When we have inner confidence in the guiding power of God, this builds a bridge in us to move forward in advancing the Good News of Jesus Christ in spite of the cultural wisdom to maintain the status quo and play it safe.

In being obedient to Jesus, Paul brought Gentiles into the temple for the first time. Examine yourself by asking who the 'Gentiles' are that you think do not belong in this temple. Then think again. What kind of change are you resistant to and why? The living God, who was revealed in Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, was the one Paul followed and the one we are to follow. Keep God at the centre of your life, so that the good intentions of your friends will not take precedence over the intentions of our loving God for your life and for this congregation. Amen.