

# “What Paul (the Apostle) and I Learned from Travel” by Cynthia Dahlin



**July 28, 2024**

## **Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

What a wealth of scripture:

Samuel—giving us the story of David, a formerly good king brought down by his own act of lust and power—which could be a sermon hoping for justice in today’s elections.

Psalm 14—a lament about corruption and a prayer for deliverance for the poor.

Ephesians –a prayer that we may have the power to know the love of God and be strengthened by that love and power.

And finally John –The parable of the loaves and fishes, and Jesus walking on water and calming the storm. Food for generations about how and whether these miracles occurred.

When Deborah put out the call for people to give sermons–she mentioned “you could talk about your travels.” With that comment, I decided to focus on Paul. He is usually unliked by feminists for his statements about women being quiet and covering their heads. But I want to look at his travels and life. And then I want to talk about how his travels affected his beliefs and preaching, and how my own travels have affected my faith.

### **Paul Saw Many Religions Around the Mediterranean**

Paul was an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin and a Roman citizen. He was a tent maker, and perhaps this meant he knew how to travel and bring his home along with him. In his travels before he became a Christian, he may have traveled from Tarsus in current Syria, to Jerusalem twice. After his conversion on the road to Damascus, he traveled about 10,000 miles–four times across the U.S. He may have witnessed many weird and different cult religions, in addition to state religions of Roman and Greek Gods. My Pauline professor at Virginia Theological Seminary pointed out that some of his chastisements against women may have been against some of the behaviors of women at cultic festivals of Baal, or Asherah or at Roman Saturnalias, when cultic public prostitution was viewed as either ritual offering, or even cleansing. Paul saw religious practices around many cultures in the Mediterranean, and heard about more from those who had traveled farther East and West as he was on the major routes

through the Roman Empire. And Paul may have wanted church behavior to be changed to what we see as more normal today.

So my professor suggested Paul, rather than being a nagging figure to women about covering their heads and acting modestly, might be seen as preaching to these early Christians to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God rather than showing ecstatic behaviors in front of their temples. It would have been a true revolution to ask worshippers to focus on loving each other instead of performing specific acts of purification or sacrifice or even building a new temple in supplication or thanks for a God's attention.

Paul centered his ministry in Ephesus for three years, 52-55 CE. That city still remembers him when you go there—a few of the tokens that were made as tickets to the theater where he preached to 20,000 people still exist. This was a city with massive temples to the Greek Goddess Artemis, to Roman Emperor Hadrian, and with Trajan's Fountain. And Paul had to gather a community among people who were used to switching Gods as their city was overtaken by different rulers over the years.

Paul left Ephesus and went to Macedonia, Corinth, and Jerusalem, where he was arrested. He was a prisoner in Caesarea, near Jerusalem, for two years, sent to Rome, and was ship-wrecked and lived in Malta for three months, then under house arrest in Rome for two years.

He wrote the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon from Rome. And Ephesians, the reading we have in today's lectionary, is believed to be a letter which was to be circulated to all of the churches—a sort of encyclical.

*Prayer to Christ – Today's lectionary reading*

3:14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,

3:15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

3:16I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit

3:17and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

3:18I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth

3:19and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

3:20Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,

3:21to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

This is a prayer Paul wrote, knowing he was a marked enemy of the Romans due to his refusal to worship Roman Gods, and thus signal that he accepted Roman domination. His prayer focused on what was important to him after all his travels. He had gotten churches rooted, showed them how to work to support each other, and written trying to get them to stop fighting over old rules of behavior, what to eat, and to act in love. Now he wants them to remember that Christ dwells within us, and this is the power that will build and fuel the church, not taxes and offerings or specific feasts or festivals. And I think that it is partly Paul's travels that taught him this so well. "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All of God's children, all around the world, Yes, we're the church together."

### **God in Many Names and Places**

When I first began Seminary, I believed that purpose of my education was to learn what the correct doctrine

was—what should I know and say to be a good Christian. But, at Virginia Theological Seminary, our spiritual directors were Benedictine monks, so that the Anglican seminarians would know their times of spiritual strife would not be reported within their own denomination. My spiritual director told me he believed that the less education and experience a pastor or priest had, the more doctrinaire they were. “The more you see the world and its people, the more expressions of God, and the more ways to worship and names of God you can accept.” I may not have fully absorbed this idea until I had a trip to Chiang Mai in Thailand with a friend from Sydney. We took the little funicular up to the temple, stopping to pay a few baht to release some birds from a cage as a buddhist prayer gesture (they fly back in a few minutes after having a bit of exercise—they know where their food is coming from) and ran into a smiling old monk, in the saffron colored traditional robe with a red sash. He asked us where we came from, and what religion we followed, in perfect English, and told us to strike the row of old bells while praying, releasing our prayers out into the world. But then, he asked if we wanted a blessing. My friend, Teresa, said “of course!” pressed her hands together, and the monk dipped his horsehair whisk in water and shook it over her. I stood back— “I’m not Buddhist.” I said. Teresa said to me “Cynthia—you have to take blessings from wherever they are offered. This is a holy man; he just uses different words!” The monk blessed me, and I could not move for a moment. Of course I needed to take a blessing without vetting the monk’s credentials. And I was beginning to see more and more ways people in different times and places try to name their contact with an uncontainable and unknowable presence. Teresa was a down-home woman from San Antonio who called me the smart one. I learned a spiritual lesson from her, and tried to teach her, who was willing to eat spicy Mexican food, to give any Thai food other than the very bland Pad Thai, a try.

**My Own Travels Have Brought me from Worshipping**

## the Churches to Being in Community

Like Paul, my own travels have similarly deeply informed my spiritual beliefs. Let me be honest—I started out life with an adventurer’s heart. When my mother would visit her parents, who lived in a Swedish enclave in Worcester, Massachusetts, the adults would hunker down in the dining room with coffee, and I would sit on the floor in the hallway next to that room, reading Richard Halliburton’s Book of Marvels. It included a list of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, which I memorized, and put in my mental to-do list. My parents had given me a list of the most important 100 books written by American Authors, and the most important 100 books written by British authors, and I believed I needed to get all of those things done to be a well-educated adult. No one said that to me—I just thought that was a goal. My parents took me to France when I was 14, and as I had completed 3 years of French, it was wonderful—I could see what learning about a place allowed me to understand and experience once I got there. The spiritual learning for me on that first trip was the weight and awe of a Gothic cathedral. I grew up in very plain Congregational churches—except for my one year in Cambridge, Mass, where the First Congregational Church on Cambridge Common had pews and stained glass and the choir got to process, singing our hearts out even if the pews weren’t full as we went up the aisle. When we got to Notre Dame in Paris, we just sat down and enjoyed the music bouncing around the nave as an organist practiced for a service, and the beauty of the light pouring through the glass, and the awareness of the centuries of faith supporting this structure just left me paralyzed in awe. Later, when I married Ron, and we began traveling in earnest—once I got to Egypt and Rome and had knocked off two of the seven wonders, we both had the bit in our teeth—cathedrals, temples, synagogues, shrines around the world, and climbing the bell towers with our kids.

Newer Seekers may not have met my husband of 47

years, Ron Barusch. He was really a born traveller—his mother had a wallchart of the smokestacks of major shipping lines of the world, and watched the freighters go in and out of San Francisco Harbor from their living room. She had the goal of going on every line as a passenger, and Ron went to many places in the Pacific and the Caribbean before we met, when I was 17 years old—me at Wellesley and he at Harvard. In 1996, Ron had the opportunity to run his law firm's office in Sydney, Australia. I was two-thirds of the way through seminary, but ready for the adventure. In Sydney, Australia, community was the lesson I really learned deeply. I was lucky to hang onto my Seekers connection as Marjory Bankson agreed to receive my spiritual reports via the old fashioned but newly minted internet, where you had to dial up and wait for the document to slowly print on paper with those holes in the margin that reeled up as it printed. But some of the American Ex-pats counted on me to lead a small prayer group for a while, so that we could pray outside of the Anglican state church, which was quite conservative at the time. Then, to complete Clinical Pastoral Education training, I started working at WomenSpace, a safe house for women in the sex industry who were heroin addicted, and learned a lot about loving people with bad behaviors—learning to look for the good and need for love in everyone—even if they did try to steal my wallet if I turned around. But I also was tutored in the fact that when we wanted to work in difficult circumstances, we needed to go in pairs. We went to drug shooting galleries and brothels in pairs, one of us talking or working with someone needing outreach, the other watching our surroundings. And, they required self-care—we all had to go to supervision, which included doing Jungian Sand Tables, and kinds of therapy I may never have had the chance to experience. The whole WomenSpace team was a community of caring for the women on the street and for each other. I brought this lesson back to N Street Village, recounting my learnings to willing ears. I was in the Uniting Seminary at the time, which served all Protestants who were not Anglican, in Sydney, and was in the foreign

students group, which I initially resented. A community of those enjoying a sojourn and also longing for home is something that informs my dealing with immigrants.

### **Seeing God in Nature**

Travel gives me chances to experience awe and a feeling for the gloriousness of creation at unexpected times.

These are times when I feel God very close to me and whoever is with me to experience the moment. A couple of the postcards of awe in my mind's eye:

- Waking up to a glorious view of Geiranger Fjord in Norway,
- seeing wild elephants in Borneo, which ended up chasing Ron and Christo as they wouldn't back off when I suggested we go back to our boat as we were annoying the little herd,
- looking down at Mount Everest while flying on a plane from Bangkok to Helsinki, and
- seeing a bubble ring in Antarctica, made by whales cooperatively swimming in circles to entrap all the shrimp and fish they well need to feed before going north in migration

All of these miracles let me know that God has created a wondrous world, if we can keep it. I frequently miss the silent retreat at Dayspring, but I find places in the wilderness where I can be quiet and witness the awe of God.

### **Witnessing Meditation in other Cultures**

I get to see many ways in which different religions turn to silence and meditation. I have marveled at the silence of children in monastic schools in Laos and Cambodia—they could sit still on mats for the required hour, and whether their minds were still or not, they looked peaceful. And they got



up in reasonable order when their meditation times were over. And in temples in Thailand and China, rows of monks continue to meditate as tourists shuffle by, never seeming to notice the disruption. I have never meditated in that way, but it is a good example to me of creating peace in the middle of chaos. But in an Indian temple, we were offered small chairs, and with a small bit of comfort I entered the silence in a Sikh temple in Delhi. And, in a temple on Lake Inle in Myanmar, I met the very quiet and gentle monks, some of whom had not left the wooden structure in the lake, approachable only by gondola-type boats, since they came as novice monks at the age of 12. And these men were happy to be there, present to their own view of the holy spirit.

These experiences really made me believe, as I taught in Seekers Sunday School, that we are all like the blind men who grab hold of a bit of an elephant. Some grab the tusk, smooth and sharp, some the tail, and someone touches the ears, which are smooth and velvety. We are trying to grab hold of the transcendent, and may need to talk to each other to get a full understanding.

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Some of you know that I used to be a bit of an adventurer. I got my pilot's license at age 15, was certified for scuba at 22, was on the Virginia Coal and Energy Commission and was the first woman to enter many of Virginia's coal mines, as superstition used to prevent women from doing this. We walked with our kids on a volcano dome in St. Lucia that was a bit too hot and was melting our shoes, and I made us retreat. We went to Papua New Guinea during a Sing Sing before an election, and we had to take off every extra item and empty our pockets, as the tribemen searched every bit of us to see if we had anything to share. And, we did slum tours in Mumbai, and Rio de Janeiro, and South Africa—trying to make sure we see both ends of the economic spectrum when we visit a new country.

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I am beginning to become more conservative. Like Paul, I am focusing more on community and relationships. We are inviting different parts of our family on our trips, and connecting with old friends in a more intentional way. It seems less important to check off new buildings, museums and tourist sites, and more important to connect with friends, family and neighbors. Age and experience gives one the confidence to realize that asking people to bring food and drink to share will provide for the group. We used to do this at Hope and a Home with family potlucks when I was so afraid to ask families with limited incomes to share, and now I do this with our BYO parties at my condo. It is miraculous wherever it happens.

Age and experience allows me to stay calm when many people are panicking.

When I saw the shallow-draft boats used on the Sea of Galilee, which is really just a lake, I believed that Jesus was just someone who knew he could float to shore even if not a great swimmer. The disciples were probably agitating and rocking the boat, but if they had stayed still, or sat on the floor of the boat to lower the center of gravity, they could have waited for the weather to settle. After all of my travels and years of life, maybe I am supposed to learn like Paul, to be calm with problems, and focus on loving my neighbor. But in confession, I also believe that God gives us our life as a gift, and I try not to pass up any opportunity to see something new, do something fun or add a new mental postcard to my collection. I do not want to miss knowing any corner of the world that will add to my understanding of other cultures or of the awe of creation.

I'll end with Psalm 145: "All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, To make known to all peoples your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom."