

Subtle Sovereignty (Acts 28:1-10)

Service in Commemoration of the International Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
First United Methodist, January 19, 2020

Dear People Loved by God and One in Jesus Christ,

It's an honor and joy for me to open the Word of God with fellow sisters and brothers in Christ, and to allow this scriptural Word to draw us into deeper communion with the Living Word, Jesus Christ, and with each other.

Speaking of brothers and sisters, here's our brother, the north African bishop St. Augustine, reflecting through a bit of creative exegesis of our first father Adam's name, on God's never-ending ability to make one, to fuse together, what humanity fragments and divides.

“Now Adam's name, as I have said more than once, means in Greek, the whole world. For there are four letters, A, D, A, and M, and with the Greeks the four quarters of the world have these initial letters. They call the East, “Anatole”; the West, “Dusis”; the North, “Arctus”; and the South, “Mesembria”; and these letters spell Adam. Adam is thus scattered throughout the globe. Set in one place, he fell and, as it were, broken small, he has filled the whole world. But the Divine Mercy gathered up the fragments from every side, forged them in the fire of love and welded into one what had been broken. That was a work which this Artist knew how to do; let no one therefore give way to despair. An immense task it was indeed; but think who the Artist was. He who remade was himself the Maker; he who refashioned was himself the Fashioner.”

An Artist who knows how to forge together what had been broken apart.

Hold that in your mind as we go from Augustine to Acts 28, and from the sublime to the somewhat mundane. I confess: Paul's shipwreck on Malta isn't the passage I would have chosen—not Scripture's most obvious text—to make a robust call for the church's unity.

It is, in turns, mundane, then strange, then otherworldly, then strange, then mundane again. A shipwreck. A campfire. A snakebite. A kind but fickle group of native islanders—Paul's a criminal! Paul's a god!—a local official's father, sick with a fever and dysentery, healed by Paul, leading to a local rush on Paul the traveling healer—Paul as Malta's new urgent care—before the ship sets sail again, aided by the “unusual kindness” of these native Maltese (Acts 28:2).

Where is the rousing call to Christian unity in *this*?

Behind every mundane and ordinary story, though, is a beautiful tale of the subtle sovereignty of the living God, is there not?

So it may help us to know that this passage was chosen for this service—and for this week of prayer for Christian unity—by our brothers and sisters, Christian leaders living and

ministering on the island of Malta, as a way of commemorating and celebrating the shipwreck that brought them the gospel of Jesus Christ through his servant Paul.

Subtle sovereignty indeed.

God works in strange and mundane ways. Through a cross and an empty tomb in Jerusalem. Through shipwrecks and snakes in Malta. Through churches in a small town in western Michigan who gather 2,000 years later to do such simple and mundane things as to sing and to pray.

And it may also be helpful to know that this passage—Paul’s shipwreck in Malta—is but a slice of Paul’s journey from Caesarea to Rome, that great imperial city in which Paul “longed to preach the gospel” (Rom 1:15), even if he would do it now in chains. What a beautiful image: Paul, the chained prisoner, proclaiming Christ, the crucified Messiah. Paul embodying the gospel he proclaimed—chains and suffering, of course, being the appropriate posture of all those who follow a crucified Christ, in Rome, Malta, Holland, or anywhere.

And it may be helpful to know that this journey to Rome via Malta was not in vain—that the Roman church that struggled so mightily during Paul’s lifetime with Jew/gentile factionalism and controversy was, within a generation or two, a body that laid claim to both Peter, that quintessential Catholic, and Paul, that proto-Protestant (or so we Protestants like to think).

Subtle sovereignty indeed. The divine mercy gathering up the fragments of the Roman church from every side, forging them in the fire of love and welding into one what had been broken—putting fragmented Adam back together again in Jesus Christ.

Should we be surprised? This is who the Artist *is*; this is what the Artist *does*.

A shipwreck brings the gospel to Malta, and puts humanity back together again on this small island. The “unusual kindness” of the Maltese sends Paul on to Rome with all he needs, and the church in Rome is strengthened towards visible unity, and before long becomes the center of the ecclesial universe.

This is who the Artist *is*; this is what the Artist *does*.

Subtle sovereignty indeed.

Which is the exhortation from this passage, and the encouragement for today, because it is not our natural inclination to see God’s good and gracious hand at work in shipwrecks and snakebites. It is not our natural inclination to think this story in Acts 28 will end well. We see blackness and see only darkness over which to despair.

So much human response to darkness devolves quickly and endlessly into cynicism or suspicion of the other, despair or hopelessness at the situation, or frantic activism to hurry up and change things ourselves, yesterday. But cynicism, despair, and frantic activism are bad looks for a people who confess the subtle sovereignty of the living God.

It would be so easy for ecumenical activity to begin here—to begin where Paul’s shipmates found themselves in the middle of Acts 27, when the storm would not stop and the ship would not find land: “All hope of our being saved was at last abandoned” (Acts 27:20).

It would be easy, much easier, to begin in despair. Look around you! The church is endlessly divided along racial, economic, and partisan lines, to name just a few. Sociological affinity groups and partisan politics on left and right have displaced the theological confession of the oneness of Christ’s body.

And yet, and yet, and yet—who *knows*, and who can *pretend* to know, what these shipwrecks will bring, what the result will be of the ship of Christ’s church beached on the reef and battered by the waves? Who knows? And who can pretend to know?

For we worship a God who stares into the blackness of the cross and, in a great apocalyptic reversal, turns evil *itself* toward the good. Turns division itself toward oneness. Puts humanity back together again at the cross.

Subtle sovereignty, indeed.

And praise God, there was one on the ship that day who knew something of the sovereignty of God. Paul stands on the storm-tossed deck of that storm-battered ship, surrounded by terrified sailors, and soldiers, and prisoners, and he speaks with the winsome confidence of one who knows the subtle sovereignty of the living God.

“Take heart, there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship” (Acts 27:22).

And then in a clear echo of the Eucharistic feast, Luke tells us that Paul took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and the sailors and the soldiers and the prisoners began to eat—to *feast*—on that sinking ship. An act of sacramental trust where hopelessness had just reigned. An act of sacramental rebellion in the face of all evidence to the contrary. An act of sacramental love in the face of the storm.

And then the ship runs aground. There’s no immediate happy ending, because that is not how life works. There’s no easy triumphalism here. God doesn’t miraculously drop Paul and his shipmates in the harbor of Rome.

And God doesn’t miraculously erase our divisions. Theological unity is hard work. Liturgical unity is hard work. Racial unity is hard work. Unity across economic lines is hard work. The rejection of partisan tribalism for the sake of the unity of Christ’s body is hard work.

No, God doesn’t drop them immediately in the harbor of Rome. Instead, he provides for them by driving them ashore into the arms of those they least expect—to a group of native islanders who need the gospel and who show them “unusual kindness,” and in so doing offer Paul and his shipmates the generous hospitality of a generous God. God provides for them by driving them towards the other—and maybe that’s what he’s doing tonight.

We're not changing the world here. But maybe, in fits and starts, the hard work of theological and liturgical unity can begin by singing and praying together. Maybe it can begin, in fits and starts, by taking our cue from the Maltese, and seeing in simple acts of generosity and hospitality—in “unusual kindness”—an opportunity to provide for one another.

Maybe like Babette's gourmet Parisian meal in the wonderful Danish film *Babette's Feast*, a lavish meal around a lavish table can begin to soften suspicions, heal old wounds, and tie new bonds in Christ.

Maybe it can begin again, in fits and starts, by hearing afresh the gospel that Paul was no doubt proclaiming to these islanders that night around the fire: “There is one body and one Spirit—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all” (Eph 4:4-5).

Not a god of Catholics, a god of Orthodox, a god of Protestants. Not a god of Wesleyans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Reformed, and Pentecostals. *One* God, and so one people of the one God.

And can you think of anyone more surprising than St. *Paul* to announce this gospel to the Maltese and to us? Mr. Persecutor of the church turned Mr. Evangelist of the gentiles?

Subtle sovereignty indeed.

And maybe God will do it again. Maybe he *is* doing it again. I wouldn't personally choose shipwrecks and snakebites, but then again, I wouldn't have chosen a Roman cross either. If that's what it takes to remake humanity in Christ, and to draw us ever more toward visible unity, then God, in your mercy, run this ship aground and force us to the cross.

This is who the Artist *is*; this is what the Artist *does*.

“He who remade was himself the Maker; He who refashioned was himself the Fashioner.”

So Father, in your mercy, make and fashion us as one people in Christ, and by the Spirit.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.