

## Apologia for Paul

*C Epiphany 5--1 Corinthians 15:1-11*

There is an old saying that no lord is noble in the eyes of his own squire. And I must say that's a little bit the way I feel as a spiritual "squire" of the apostle Paul, who wrote the letter to the Corinthians we read from today. Now, some of you may not share my difficulties with the personality of Paul, and if that's the case, if Paul strikes you as the kind of guy you would *love* to have as a best friend, then all I ask is that you try to refrain from snoring while I talk to everybody else. Because I've got to say, Paul does not seem to me like an easy guy to love. Or even get along with.

Some examples: He writes to his congregations as if they were little children, one minute admonishing them to "join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in me" (Philip 3:17), and the next minute manipulating them with threats: "Which would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" (1 Cor 4:21). Where Jesus ate with outcasts and sinners, Paul tells the Corinthians "not to associate with anyone...who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber" (1 Cor 5:11). (Imagine how empty our churches would be if we took *that* advice!) Where Jesus challenged unjust authority, Paul reminds his people "to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient" (Titus 3:1), especially singling out women and slaves to be "submissive" to their husbands and masters (Titus 2:5, 9). Then there's this chestnut for the church in Thessalonica: "the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God...but God's wrath has overtaken them at last" (1 Thess 2:14-16). There's no doubt that a lot of ugly

Christian behavior over the centuries has been justified with Paul's words, and when I first started reading Paul it seemed almost offensive to me that we call him a saint. Is this stubborn, patronizing, arrogant, pushy guy really saint material?

Well it does help to study Paul, because some of these objections have to do with the cultural and linguistic world within which Paul worked. For example, it was typical for leaders in that time to hold themselves up as moral examples for their followers--that wasn't just Paul being egotistical. Paul's endorsement of the social codes placing masters over slaves and men over women is disappointing, insulting, un-Christian but it's very much a function of the cultural world in which Paul is trying to found his churches. And what often sounds like anti-semitism in the New Testament really reflects more of a struggle between different Jewish groups, different sects of Judaism, of which Jesus-followers were still one. Finally, I think it's only fair to acknowledge that this is Paul's mail we're reading here. He is writing privately to individual congregations about specific issues with no idea that these letters will be cemented wholesale into scripture. Imagine that! Your least complimentary moments, your most bitter and flaming emails, strung up forever on the clothesline of literature like soiled laundry.

Now I'm not trying to excuse Paul. I'm just saying that Paul's humanity is very much on display in the New Testament--good, bad, and ugly--and appreciating that humanity, cutting Paul some slack for it, brings us one step toward a more nourishing engagement with Paul's story. Because, you see, like Peter in our gospel reading today, Paul had a profound sense of his own unworthiness to serve God. I imagine there are a number of us who can relate to *that*. In fact, in today's letter, Paul confesses to being the "least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle," because he used to persecute the

Christian church. (So if you think he's bad in the New Testament, imagine what a jerk he was *then!*)

And the miracle of Paul's life is not that God perfected Paul when he became a Christian or at any other time. The miracle is not that God cleansed Paul's personality of all its unsavory and annoying qualities. The miracle is that God took those very qualities--that hard-headedness, that arrogance and drive, that bullying personality--and aligned them in a positive direction. God lit Paul on fire with Jesus' message of love and sent Paul out to do what Paul did best: plant churches. And look what Paul accomplished! He traveled thousands of miles all over the Mediterranean, surviving shipwrecks and imprisonment and beatings for what he believed. He brought people together into worshipping communities that transcended barriers of ethnicity, class, and gender. And when he was done, these communities, dedicated to uplifting the downtrodden and loving their enemies in the name of Jesus, had taken hold and were on their way to becoming a new religion.

See, our tradition doesn't call people saints because they were infallible or even necessarily wise. Our tradition calls people saints because they allowed God to use who they were, warts and all, to further God's cause of spreading love in the world. "By the grace of God," Paul says, "I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." That is what we celebrate when we celebrate our saints. So the lesson for you and me is clear: You don't have to be a saint to be a saint. You don't have to be enlightened to be an instrument of God's purposes. You just have to seek to learn who God made you to be, and you have to be open to how God might be calling you to align those individual gifts, that uniqueness of you, with God's dream for humankind.