

***Do You Know Who You Are?©*****Acts 22:1-21****September 2, 2012****Sharlyn Gates**

Do you find it difficult, or easy, to share your faith with others? Have you ever been in a situation where people were against you and what you believed? Maybe it wasn't an angry mob like Paul was facing; but still, just being in the midst of people who are totally on the opposite side of your beliefs can be fairly intimidating. I think that is true in religion and in politics because those two subjects can stir up a great deal of passion.

Have you ever been in a debate, where you had to defend something you were saying or believing? What would be the most important thing to do in order to prepare for that defense?

I think knowing what I'm talking about would be important! That would mean studying and researching every side and every aspect of the subject I'm defending. But that isn't the only thing important to do. After getting all the facts and looking at every possible perspective, I would have to know deep within myself what I truly felt God was leading me to believe. I would have to have that strong sense of knowing why I believe one way. I would have to know myself.

The truth is, knowing ourselves deeply ... understanding where we've come from – our history, our upbringing, our experiences in life, our sense of God with us – does usually have something to do with how we have come to believe in something.

Our missionary, Paul, certainly had a sense of knowing who he was as he found himself full circle in his travels – back in Jerusalem, even though all of his friends warned him to not go back there. There were many of the Jewish leaders who were anxious to get their hands on Paul and have him killed. They were so angry with him for preaching to Gentiles and especially for telling them they did not have to follow all the Jewish laws and rules. They accused him of teaching against Israel's long history of tradition.

The Jews were divided about whether or not Jesus was the Messiah, which was Paul's message – but they were mostly angry that he was teaching against the tradition, and even accused him of terrorism, which was against the Roman laws and why the Roman soldiers were even involved.

Paul is first beaten with fists pounding on him. It's difficult to imagine him being able, after that beating, to ask them to allow him to talk, but he does. And he tells them his story. He shares who he is ... where he came from ... that he is a Jew, from Tarsus, trained by a highly respected and well known Rabbi. He was a Pharisee who defended the Jewish law and stood up for God with a zeal that

outshined no one else. In fact, he was ready and passionate about killing any Christians because he believed they were against God and the Jewish faith.

And then he boldly told them about his radical conversion experience while on the road to Damascus – on the way to arrest Christians and take them back to be tried and executed.

Paul told about how he was blinded by a bright light and how he heard the voice of Jesus asking why he was persecuting him. He told about his instructions by the Spirit as to what he was to do, and how his sight returned, and how he was a changed man. He was sent to preach to the Gentiles because the Jews would not believe.

This, of course, stirred up the mob again and they were ready to kill him on the spot and they probably would have except the Roman soldier took him away to have him flogged before being questioned.

Paul's background and his citizenship as a Jew and a born Roman Citizen saved him from the flogging. There was a serious law against flogging a free citizen. It also was helpful in convincing the Romans that he was not a terrorist, against the government.

It turns out (as we read further, into chapter 23) that Paul's nephew discovered that the Jews were plotting a plan to kill Paul. He took that news to the Roman centurion who in turn created a plan to get Paul out of Jerusalem and to the safety of Herod's headquarters in Caesarea where he would be under arrest but safe until his hearing. Once again, the Holy Spirit had intervened and Paul had been saved. He would be heading soon for Rome, the place he was longing to go with the good news about Jesus, the Messiah.

We may never (at least I pray we will never) find ourselves in that kind of life-threatening situation, as Paul did, where we have to defend our beliefs and our actions to a mob that is beating on us and plotting to kill us.

But we are called by God, as Christians – Christ followers – to know what we believe, and to stand firm in our faith. Does that mean we never change in how we see an issue? Does that mean we never grow to see things differently? I don't think it does. I think it means that we hold fast to our belief that God is God and that Jesus is the Christ.

Paul certainly had a strong belief that his persecution of Christians was the right thing to do – that he was standing on God's side, doing the right thing for the faith.

But when Paul had his radical conversion experience on the Damascus road, he knew without a doubt that what he experienced, what he heard and saw, were the truth and he preached it with a passion.

You can be sure that Paul thought a lot about who he was – how he was trained, how he grew up in the faith and what that meant to him; how it influenced him in so many ways. Just by listening to Paul’s defense speech, we can tell how he was systematic in listing all the points in his life that had been strong experiences, concluding with his conversion experience.

Some of us have known, like Paul, that radical conversion experience. Over the years, I’ve met a number of people who can tell me the exact day and year that they were changed – the exact time they became a believer. Some of them were rough and tough and mean and they were transformed by Christ in their conversion. They “saw the light” so to speak and changed their ways.

But many of us, me included, can’t pinpoint a certain date as to when we became a Christian, or knew God’s love for us. For me, I was born into a Christian home and was in church not long after that. I was baptized into the faith before I was 6 months old. I had grandparents who were also members of that Presbyterian Church and a grandfather who taught me old hymns before I could even read.

There has never been a time when I didn’t know God’s love for me or that Christ died for me. But there have been times in my life when I felt lost, when I chose to turn away and go another direction. And I know what it feels like to be alienated from God and a church family – even though it wasn’t God or the church that pushed me away. It was the opposite. It was all me who had done the pushing.

Yet it was the same God and the same family that wooed me back like the father who welcomed the prodigal son home. It was unconditional love that was the irresistible grace of God that I experienced. I know what the relief of forgiveness feels like. I know the flood of tears and joy that come in that reconciliation. I know exactly what it means when I say or hear those words “All who are in Christ are a new creation. The old life is past and a new life has begun.”

The thing is ... we all have a story. For some of us it is a story of forgiveness. For some, it is a story of grief, or sickness, or fear that has been turned around. As the Psalmist says, “You, Lord, have changed my mourning into dancing.” (Psalm 30:11) All of us have a story of transformation to share. We do it with our authentic, genuine selves, from knowing ourselves, knowing our story. And the more we tell it, the more we repeat it, the easier it becomes.

I believe that our stories of who we are, and of our God experiences, are there for two reasons:

1. We become stronger and closer to God as we think about how God has been with us and helped us, forgiven us; and as we give thanks to God for all God has done. The experience itself and the telling draw us to God and give us a certainty in our belief that God is real.

2. We are meant to pass it on. We are ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20) just like Paul, of the Good News that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God, sent to give us hope, healing, restoration and resurrection. We are meant to pass it on with our authentic selves so that those who hear it will be encouraged and will be open to the Spirit wooing them to God as well.

Does that mean every person we tell will immediately change their minds or become a believer? I'm afraid not! Some will believe, but some will be skeptical, or will laugh, or might even be angry.

Beth Moore, who wrote a book on Acts titled "To Live Is Christ", writes about this very thing. She says:

*"Do you have a tendency to rate your own testimony or read your own results? Your personal story about Christ is worth telling. If you are excited about it, others are likely to find your testimony exciting too. However, their reactions are not your responsibility. Sometimes," she writes, "I have to remind myself that I was never called to be the Holy Spirit. He will convict. He will remind. Don't do His job, but faithfully do yours. Go tell your story. No one can tell it like you."*<sup>1</sup>

I was reminded by that of the time when I was installed here as your pastor. Rev. Glenn Grant from Kirkridge Presbyterian Church in Grand Blanc gave the "Charge to the new Pastor" (me). He said something that will always stick with me: "Remember ... you are the donkey!" He was referring to when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey ... that the donkey ushered Christ to where the people were, but it was Christ who did the saving work of being the Savior.

We are, all of us, the donkey who takes Christ to others. What happens after we tell about him is up to the Holy Spirit and that person – not us. Our responsibility is to get more comfortable with sharing Christ by knowing ourselves and our stories and telling others in love and joy. Our success is not measured by the response of others, but by our obedience to God.

Maybe we should start practicing on one another. I'd love to hear your story of faith and of God in your life. Perhaps just by rehearsing with one another, we will all become stronger and closer to each other and God.

---

<sup>1</sup> Beth Moore, *To Live is Christ*, p. 189, copyright 2001, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee

The Holy Spirit is present with us, just as he was with Paul. And with the Holy Spirit, anything can happen ... lives are transformed, the blind see, hearts are changed, people know the sweet relief of forgiveness, hope and peace replace grief and fear, churches grow and are on fire with the Spirit.

Yes, with the power of the Holy Spirit among us anything can happen – and it probably will!

*© Copyright 2012. All Rights Reserved.*