

“God’s love poured into our hearts”

Good morning, friends. I am always grateful to see your beautiful faces on Sunday mornings. And while I am looking forward to some time away for rest and reflection, travel to Central America and some much-needed time with my family, I will miss sharing Sunday mornings with you all over the next few months. Know that I will pray for you; and I would ask you to also pray for me and for us while we are away from you for a time.

Our scripture passage for today is from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Last Sunday, the children re-enacted the story of Paul’s conversion, his encounter with the risen Lord. Throughout his letters Paul reflects on his own experience of conversion in terms of death and new life: “I have been crucified with Christ,” he says in Galatians, “Nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live, I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God” (Gal 2:20). In a profound sense, for Paul, this experience of God through the risen Lord marked the beginning of a new life, which he describes in dramatic language, even apocalyptic language, speaking of his deliverance from the “present evil age” (Gal 1:4). So, too, Paul expects that his experience is no private, individual affair, but a *cosmic* happening – an experience of the turning of the ages – that touches down, so to speak, in the lives of those who Spirit encounters in power. The story of Paul’s conversion reminds me of a Rolling Stone song called “Saint of Me,” which in Mick Jagger and Keith Richards lyrics goes like this (don’t worry I won’t try to do an impression!): *St. Paul the persecutor was a cruel and sinful man, / Jesus hit him with a blinding light and then his life began. I said ye-e-es*. The refrain of the song is, however, “You’ll never make a saint of me,” reminding us of the obstacles one faces in seeking to follow in Paul’s footsteps, indeed, it raises the question as to its possibility at all.

In a commencement address given at Bryn Mawr College in 1986, the novelist Ursula Le Guin describes three different “languages”: the “father tongue,” the “mother tongue,” and the “native tongue.” By these metaphorical designations Le Guin is not so much referring to “men’s speech” as opposed to “women’s speech” but to *different kinds of communication* that serve different purposes. The “father tongue” is the language of dominant power and public discourse – it is language that operates in the tone of “objectivity” with the purpose of getting things done. The “essential gesture of the father tongue,” Le Guin reflects, “is not reasoning but distancing – making a gap, a space, between the subject or self and the object or other.”<sup>1</sup> Characteristic of such language, she writes, is that it is “spoken from above. It goes one way.” The “mother tongue,” on the other hand, is “conversation, a word the root of which means ‘turning together.’ The mother tongue is language not as mere communication but as relation, relationship. It connects. It goes two ways, many ways, an exchange, a network. Its power is not in dividing but in binding, not in distancing but in uniting.”<sup>2</sup> The “mother tongue” is the language that is learned in childhood, often by a mother, but not always; it is language that is personal and connected to our emotional life. When this private language, the language of the home interacts with public discourse, what emerges is what Le Guin calls the “native tongue,” which is “the marriage of the public discourse and the private experience, making a power, a beautiful

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula Le Guin, “Bryn Mawr Commencement Address,” *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989) 147-60.

<sup>2</sup> Le Guin, 149.

thing.” Le Guin uses the example of art and music and literature to get at the meaning of this “native tongue” – it can be seen in “speeches and science, any use of language when it is spoken, written, read, heard as art.” It is the work of “living well, living with skill, grace, energy – like carrying a basket of bread and smelling it and eating as you go.”<sup>3</sup> As the theologian Susan Eastman puts it, “For the native speaker, one’s mother tongue is richly allusive, idiomatic, the carrier of collective and private memories, inseparable from its cultural history. Mother tongue carries history with it, even while transmuting that history through the medium of experience. For the nonnative speaker, accurate hearing of another’s mother tongue is always somewhat elusive and requires sensitivity to both history and experience.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul has often been read as using the language of the “father tongue,” the language of top-down, one way power and abstract objectivity, but Eastman suggests that we pay closer attention to how Paul draws on the “native tongue” and the “mother tongue” in his intensely personal and experiential letters that he writes to various congregations, often identifying himself with maternal imagery. The twelfth century abbot, Gueric, seemed to grasp a similar notion when he spoke of Paul’s conversion in the following way: “The torturer became the mother, the executioner became the nurse, so that you might truly understand that the whole of his blood was changed into the sweetness of milk, his cruelty into loving kindness.”<sup>5</sup> Beverly Gaventa, my former teacher, has pointed to something similar in Paul, noting that Paul often draws on maternal imagery in passages that concern the growth and sustenance of people newly converted to Christ.<sup>6</sup>

What difference does it make to read our passage for today from Paul with this in mind? Here we encounter a passage that has commented by theologians for centuries. In many ways, it is the heart of the faith of the Protestant Reformation – for Luther this is the touchstone of the gospel: a person is “justified by faith apart from works prescribed the law.” But this is no abstract theological formula, for Paul, it has real world, embodied and relational meaning to it. Because we are justified by faith, we have *peace with God* and we *stand in grace*, such that we may even “boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” Of course, Paul is well aware of the needs of his communities, he has heard of their suffering and their struggles, but he nevertheless believes that this *peace with God* and *standing in the grace of God* is enough to nourish and sustain us, because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5:5). The love of God comes to us even in our weakness, even and especially for the ungodly. And this message, this good news, is for Paul, not only expressed in a *vertical* dimension, as if this a description of a kind of transaction between God and the private individual. No, for Paul the love of God is expressed concretely, it is *proven* concretely in our relation to one another. Through the grace and love of God through Christ we have been *reconciled* to God by the power of the Holy Spirit. And this gift of reconciliation, this gift of peace, is what binds us together as a congregation, nourished and sustained by the peace, grace, and love of God, which is continually poured out into our hearts and into our community. Perhaps this may be an example of Paul’s “mother tongue,” expressed in his concern for the community in times of joy and in times of peril, his prayer that they will be strengthened and nourished by the love, grace, peace, and hope of God that has been poured into their hearts. In this text, I read Paul as saying “do

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<sup>3</sup> Le Guin, 152.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Eastman, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Gueric, “Second Sermon for Saints Peter and Paul, in *Sermons*, ed. J. Morson and H. Costello. Cited in Eastman, *Recovering Paul’s Mother Tongue*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Beverly Gaventa, *Our Mother St. Paul*.

not be anxious” and “do not fear” because *you have all that you need* because God’s Spirit is present with you, sustaining you and nourishing you in a deep peace.

As our family departs from this congregation for a time to travel to Central America so that we may encounter the “native tongue” of peoples with whom we already feel intimately connected by virtue of the grace of God, I leaving feeling assured by Paul’s “mother tongue,” by a deep sense that the Spirit will nourish and sustain us, that the reconciling love of God that we have come to know in part will be deepened in us, and strengthen us in faith. So, too, I find radical assurance in the language of Paul’s “mother tongue,” hoping and praying for you that God will continually pour out love into your hearts, that God will nourish and sustain this congregation by the power of the Spirit. May the peace of God and the grace in which we stand be present with and among you, enlivening your collective work and ministry; may the love of God that has been poured into your hearts, nourish and sustain you, opening you up to new growth and new ways of living and connecting in reconciling love, such that you experience the presence and power of the new creation in your life together. I pray for you in hope, trusting in the promises of God. Amen.