

NEGLECTED CHARACTERS OF THE BIBLE: AGRIPPA

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Acts 26:1-32

Today's sermon continues my series on neglected characters of the Bible. It's based on the work of Methodist Bishop William Willimon while he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. We've been focusing on some of the "little people" of the Bible, who are rarely the subject of sermons. Today's "little person" is Agrippa II—or, to give him his Roman name, Marcus Julius Agrippa, great-grandson of Herod the Great and the last king of the Herodian dynasty in Palestine.

Once again, Paul is in trouble with the law. In Jerusalem he has been mistakenly accused of bringing one of the Gentile Christians into the inner courts of the Temple, beyond the barrier excluding non-Jews. The Jewish leaders want the Romans to crucify him, but Paul is not just another Jew; he's a Roman citizen—an unusual status for a Jew from the provinces in that world where citizenship was far from universal. Roman citizens had important rights that mere subjects of the Empire did not. The case against Paul is pretty much non-existent, and the Romans are inclined to let him go, but that would incite the locals and Palestine is a powder keg as it is. So, Paul is held without bail by the Roman governor in Caesarea. Two years go by and the case never comes to trial. Then there's a change of governors, and the new fellow says to Paul, let's go up Jerusalem and clean up this little misunderstanding so you can be on your way. Paul says, "You've got to be kidding. I can't get a fair trial in Jerusalem. I'd never get out of there alive." He appeals to the emperor for a trial in Rome—which any Roman citizen can do.

But shortly before the marshals are to transport Paul to Rome, King Agrippa pays a courtesy call on Festus, the governor. They get to talking about Paul. "What is it with these crazy Jews," Festus wants to know. "You've been here a lot longer than I have. Can you tell me?" "Damned if I know," Agrippa admits, "but I'd be interested in hearing this character for myself." So, they summon Paul and Agrippa asks him how he got into this mess. So Paul tells them about Jesus. He testifies to what Jesus means and how Jesus has changed him.

It is one of the most eloquent speeches of the entire New Testament. In a succinct, factual, and yet moving way, Paul gives the whole history of salvation. He presents Jesus as God’s plan for what is wrong with the world, Jesus as the one for whom the world has been waiting, even when the world did not know that it was waiting. Here is Paul, a Jew who has been stirring up so much commotion in the empire and here is King Agrippa, the representative of the empire, listening. Paul is powerless. Unlike Agrippa or Festus, Paul has no troops backing him up. King Agrippa is powerful, at least he is powerful in the way that we conventionally define power. All Paul has is words. Most of the time, that is the only defense Christians ever have: just words, and the promises of God.

Agrippa listens, listens perhaps as we do to the stories of disaster victims whom correspondents interview on the TV news every day. Agrippa listens, listens to this the most eloquent of Christian testimonials, and...it appears to go in one ear and right out the other. Oh, the king is moved by Paul’s speech, but not enough to commit, not enough to change. He tells Paul that he is, “almost persuaded” or as the NIV translation puts it, “Paul, do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

And is that so surprising? Agrippa, after all, is a classically trained, university educated sort of person; trained, no doubt, in the empire’s very best schools for people in public policy. And one of the main things they teach you in school is to step back, don’t rush to judgment, take your time, consider all the facts dispassionately, keep your options open. A five-minute speech, even a good one, is hardly like to persuade him to embrace something so controversial, so much against the grain. It’s all very interesting, of course, and he’ll take it under advisement. But that is as far as King Agrippa can go. Almost, but not over the line—almost persuaded.

To someone like Paul—remember his words to the Philippians: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”¹—for someone like Paul, this sort of lukewarm, “almost persuaded” is persuaded not much at all.

I can empathize with Agrippa. In our time, even more than in his, it is so easy to spend our lives on the verge, somewhere in that land called “Almost.” In our universities and the media, in our great corporations and so much of secular society, we dress up this stance toward living as “open-

¹ Philippians 3:8.

mindedness” or “tolerance” or polite civility. We don’t want to be judgmental and we are fearful of fanaticism. And, to be sure, there are too many people these days who are dead certain that they are right, that they have the truth, and that everybody else is not just wrong but evil. We don’t need any more zealots in the world.

Yet the reaction to zealotry has all too often been to conclude that all beliefs are merely opinions, merely personal points of view. It is fine for you to hold those points of view as long as you don’t tell anybody else about them or try to convince anyone else that what you see may be a truthful depiction of what is.

I would submit that this reticence is the very death of the intellect. It is a facile attempt to deal with *real* political and religious differences by denying that differences matter. If you say, “I am glad for people to be religious, as long as they keep their religion to themselves,” isn’t that just another way of saying, “Religion is wonderful, as long as we first all agree that it doesn’t mean anything.”

And there’s the danger that we as individuals drift along in a uncommitted limbo, supposing that a generalized *openness* to every belief can take the place of a personal *commitment* to a particular belief. It is the nature of religious faith to make large claims about the way the world really is. I would rather have someone tell me they believe the story of Jesus is the most ridiculous, naive and primitive thing they’ve ever heard, than to say it’s just one more beautiful and helpful way of talking about the world—on a par with the ways of Buddha and Mohammed and Sheila, and every other religion, philosophy and possible point of view. That is being grossly unfair to different points of view. That is like saying, “I don’t subscribe to any religion except the one that says that all religions are hogwash.” To me, that’s not being open-minded or intellectually honest.

At any rate, Agrippa, after hearing Paul’s eloquent testimony, says that he would like to think the whole matter over. Apparently, that was all he ever did. We never hear that he was converted, that he actually became a follower of Jesus. Perhaps he didn’t want to appear narrow-minded or to rush to judgment too quickly. And so, he thought about it. There are many ways of denying Jesus.

All of us are living by some point of view or another. All of us are betting our life on something. We may be betting our life on the point of view that says, “I try not to have any point of view other than that there are no point of views worth living and dying by.”

Or, there is a point of view that says, “I still have lots of questions about Jesus and his way; of course, there is still much about all this that I don’t understand, and I constantly fall short of being a faithful follower of Jesus, nevertheless, I am trying. I am convinced that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and I am doing my best to be faithful to him.”

Traditionally, Labor Day marks the ebb of summer and the approach of the busier days of fall. This year, everything is topsy-turvy what with the pandemic and all, but it is arguably still a moment listen once more for the call of Jesus to each one of us to come forward and to walk with him. He promises to feed us at the table that he has prepared, to give us himself and everything we need to be his body in the world. Our lives may be more circumscribed these days, but they still present daily opportunities for faithful witness and action in Christ’s name.

Washington Irving told the story of Rip Van Winkle, the old man who, while still a young man, took a nap under a tree upstate and woke up a dozen years later having slept through a revolution. There are lots of ways to “sleep through a revolution.” One of the ways is that of Agrippa, who was almost persuaded, but not quite. Don’t let the parade pass *you* by.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.