

Sermon, September 12, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-9; Titus 2:1-15

“Shaped by Community: Everyone Needs a Paul”

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I was in a conversation with someone the other day who said with surprising confidence that they didn't believe in God because they had looked around and found no empirical evidence that He existed. And my first response to her was almost, almost, *but I assume you believe in all sorts of things for which there is no empirical evidence that only become evident to you after you accepted them.* Now I said almost because, while I think there is a lot of logic behind what I said, that we believe a lot of things in life we take on faith until we experience them, is perhaps the wrong approach. Because it seems to say there is no proof we can point to that shows God exists.

What I've found is that if we look around, there is plenty of evidence to show God's character and nature. The universe points out God's character and His attributes if we are only willing to look. Take, for instance, the beginning of Genesis tells us God is a creative God. He loves to create, and He loves to make things that reflect His beauty. We can see that all around us, can't we? Nature itself attests both to the beauty of God but also His creative process in that the world is constantly recreating beauty. Flowers create flowers.

Look, at these incredible rock formations. They are beautiful, and there is nothing in my head or any evidence that things of such beauty can possibly be random. They are magnificent, they are awe inspiring. Aren't they?

Of course, formations like this don't happen overnight. It took hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of years for them to be created. They were created by wind and water, sometimes great sudden pressure, sometimes constant smaller amounts of pressure like a stream or a small dripping waterfall. But over time, over the eons that outside pressure boring in helped shaped them into things of beauty. I can no more say these are random than the Statue of David just happened to be there. I assume that a master craftsman applied pressure with chisel and hammer. Again, external pressure creating something of beauty as it is formed under the outside forces.

Of course, it's not always beautiful. We have been in prayer I hope for those who experienced the hurricane winds of the last hurricane. I have a good friend who is a pastor in Louisiana before Ida made landfall who commented: *I haven't even heard back from the insurance company on my last claim from last time when we had a hurricane.* Winds, the outside forces, can also bring ugliness and destruction.

So external forces over time can either shape something into something that is beautiful and a testimony to the beauty of God or those fires can bring destruction and ugliness. The type of forces and the extent of those forces as they shape something matters.

It's safe to say that's also true for the human heart and the human soul. I know that especially in our culture that honors independence and individualism that we love to hold onto the idea of the self-made person. I am a self-made man, we say, or I am a self-made woman. Which sounds great and sounds very American. It sounds great, but it simply isn't true. It's like taking a lump of clay, putting it on the table, and say *become a vase*. The clay needs that external force of hands shaping it.

And while we have free will and in some ways make our own decisions, we are also a product of the external forces that exert themselves in our lives. None of us gets through life without being affected by the wind and rains of family, loved ones, good times, and bad ones. The persons we are in many ways will be determined by the forces that help shape our lives.

If that's true, then, it would seem to me that we would want to insure, as much as possible, that the winds that shape us, those forces are shaping us into the thing of beauty God intends for us to become and not for destruction. That's why we began this series last week **Shaped by our Community**. The people you surround yourself with will, in the end, help determine if you become something of beauty or something of destruction. Be cautious about who you surround you. None of us can get through life unscathed or unchanged.

Last week, we said that everyone needs three types of people in their lives in order to be shaped in a healthy way. We will be looking at these types over the next three weeks. The first one we want to look at is everyone needs a Paul. Everybody needs a Paul in their life who helps shape us into the creation of beauty that God wants us to be. Yes, like it or not, you need other people in order to be a spiritually healthy, fully formed human being. And everybody needs a Paul.

So what is a Paul? A Paul is a spiritual mentor. Everybody needs a spiritual mentor in their lives if they are going to be whom God wants us to be. Everybody needs at least one person if not more, who carries a certain amount of spiritual wisdom and maturity with them. So let me ask the question in this way. Do you make it a habit of surrounding yourself with people who are more spiritually mature than you are? Not necessarily older than you, but do you make it a habit of surrounding yourself with spiritually mature people? If not, if you tend to surround yourself with people who aren't spiritually mature, then what is helping shape your soul?

The Paul's in our lives are the people we see as spiritual mentors. People in our lives who care about the persons we are becoming, who want to help shape us into Christ-like individuals. Who are your spiritual mentors? You have them whether you know it or not. My question is, are they spiritually mature? And what makes a good mentor? There are at least three attributes you want in a spiritual mentor who is shaping you for beauty.

First, they make you aware of God. This is what Eli does with Samuel in our Old Testament Lesson, isn't it? Eli knows it's God speaking to Samuel, and he says go back, listen and answer. He makes him aware of God's presence. Do you have people in your life no matter what the circumstances you are in who make you aware of God's presence, who point you to him?

Secondly, they care more about your being shaped in the image of God than they do your feelings. The wind and the rain, the waterfall and the fast winds don't ask the rocks if they mind being shaped from what they are into something else. The sculpture does not ask the block of marble if it minds being shaped and sanded away in order to bring about the statue inside. They are willing to do whatever it takes as long as it takes to create something of beauty. The Paul's in your life are those people who love you enough to tell

you the truth. They will tell you the truth about the good in your life, and they will tell you the truth about the ugliness in your life. But always with love. Look at Paul's letters. In virtually every one of Paul's letters, he tells the people how much he loves them. How loved they are, how proud he is to see what God is doing in their lives. But he will also point out what needs to change, what is sin and what is hurting them. Do you have some people in your life who are willing to love you enough to point out the good and the bad and who are willing to stay alongside you as God shapes you?

Thirdly, the Paul's in our lives constantly calls us into mission and ministry. Look at what Paul tells Titus in our New Testament lesson. Paul is giving Titus marching orders. Get out there and do these things. Make a difference in the lives of the people. God has made you into something beautiful not so you can rest but so that in that beauty you may point the way to Him.

So who is your Paul? Do you have some? If so, be thankful. If not, pray God will begin to surround you with these type of people. Listen and allow God to shape you into something beautiful for Him. Amen.