



way
of
life

Peter and Paul absorbed the reality of God that comes from our salvation in Jesus Christ. They worked to translate that reality to the world in a number of powerful sermons in the book of Acts. Through our series, **Way of Life**, we'll be looking at these powerful sermons and how they call us to action. Early Christians were known as "People of the Way," as though they were fighting for a new way of life. They were advocating for a way of life, but that way of life is Jesus Himself. Presenting Jesus as Savior and Lord competes with the alternative ways of life presented in culture. By digging into these sermons in Acts, we will see how the way of Jesus is better than any alternative offered by the world.

PEOPLE OF GOD • Acts 13:16-33 • Tim McConnell • September 25, 2016

It isn't "have to," it's "get to." We need to remind ourselves sometimes don't we? It isn't that you *have to go* to the parent orientation at the elementary school, it's that you *get to be* a part of a great educational community. It isn't that you *have to go* to that family event—wedding, anniversary—you *get to*. It isn't that you *have to go* to the polls in November and select one of these candidates for President of the United States...you *get to be* part of the greatest experiment in democracy the world has ever seen. (The last chapter of it, anyway. Lord, help us!) How about church? Is it *have to* or *get to*? How many of you *have to be* here? Church is *get to*. We *get to be* part of this story, we *get to be* in the body of Christ, we *get to be* the people of God.

We were all worried about the Broncos game today. *Will anyone turn out for church? Maybe we should just cancel. Naw, might as well see who shows up!* I have to admit, it's new for me having the team play at 11:00 am. That's a Mountain Time thing. I figure we just need to educate our people on the divine dispensation called the DVR: *And the Lord said, "Let there be DVRs across the land," and lo, it came to pass that all the people of God pressed "record all" and never missed another game, and skippeth all commercials and halftime!* I'm excited about the Broncos myself. I'm excited about the new quarterback, Trevor Siemian, because he comes from my college, Northwestern University—famous for producing the greatest quarterbacks in the NFL. (That's a joke, for you non-sports types). I was thinking about Trevor Siemian this week, and what it must feel like to be him. Can you imagine what it must be like to walk into the locker room in Broncos Stadium, to your locker with your name on it, and pick up your Denver Broncos jersey? What did it feel like the first time? His story, the story of Trevor Siemian is now part of a larger story. His life with all its twists and turns is now part of this large, grand story called the Denver Broncos and he gets to wear those colors. It must feel amazing!

You know what? I feel the same way about First Pres. I hope you do too. We *get to be* part of a story much larger than any one of us. For 144 years, the Lord has used this church to write Kingdom stories, amazing stories of the grace of God. You and I *get to join* in that story. The little stories of our lives get wrapped into a bigger story, we *get to wear* bigger colors, we *get to be* part of some-

thing bigger, grander, than any one of us could ever be alone. And in 100 years which will be the more important story? In 100 years—no, in ten years—I'm guessing there will be very few people telling the story of the Broncos 2016 season. But 100 years from now people will look back at this story. They will. There will be stories told about this generation at First Pres, the generation that preserved the truth of the Gospel from cultural confusion and brought good news in Jesus' name, the generation that started City Serve and changed the reputation of Christianity in our city, the generation that altered the course of homelessness in Colorado Springs, the generation that imagined a coffee shop as a ministry and pulled it off, the generation that broke new ground for worship downtown... We *get to be* a part of that.

But even richer, even more eternally significant is that God intends to use First Pres right now and in this generation to reach lost souls and bring them to faith in Jesus Christ—to move eternal souls from a destiny of darkness and death to a destiny of salvation and life. Right now there is a family nearby struggling to figure out why their story matters, how their story got to where it is today. Next week or very soon, these members of our community are going to come to a crisis, a crisis serious and earth-shaking enough that this couple is going to try church again. They are going to seek God again. They are going to walk through those doors, and come into this space, and sit down nervous and uncomfortable and hopeful—and the light of Jesus Christ, the love and grace and forgiveness and joy of the Lord, is going to break over them and their souls will never be the same. We *get to be* part of that. We *get to be* part of the story of the people of God.

Paul is our preacher this morning. His message is just this: you *get to be* part of the people of God. This story is your story, if you will accept it. Paul knows this, because his own story was radically changed. He grew up with a great story—a success story. Saul of Tarsus was a success story. He was born with resources and Roman citizenship and access to education, and he was smart. Smartest in his class. He was the one who went off to the greatest universities, the school of the Rabbi Gamaliel. His education was equal to multiple PhD's. Saul operated in four or five different languages, and a

study of his writings reveals that he knew how to write in different motifs—he could write letters to match the epistolary style of the Roman Senate, legal briefs to match any rhetorician or lawyer, religious articles and journals to match the greatest theologians, sermons, speeches, news reports, you name it. Saul was one of the brightest lights on the Christmas tree, the sharpest knife in the drawer! But he was using all that talent to try to destroy the Jesus movement. He ran around persecuting Christians, and even getting some executed, until Jesus knocked him off his horse, literally, and said, “Stop it. You work for me now.” He was renamed Paul. Now we find him off in the far reaches. It’s as though Paul wanted to get as far away from that previous life as he could. But his gifts, his talents, his smarts—all of that story now gets wrapped up in the story of Jesus, the story of the people of God.

So this sermon is at Pisidian Antioch, the region called Galatia, now central Turkey. Up in the mountains on a high plateau. It was a large city on an important trade route, filled with Roman Army veterans, local people called Phrygians, Greeks, Easterners and some Jews scattered far from home. Paul went to the synagogue. He knew the traditions and practices, he prepared his remarks and he stood up in the proper way with the proper motions and graces—and preached. As few men could, Paul summarized the whole of God’s redemptive activity from Abraham to David to Jesus. He shares the big, big story. Do you know it? It goes something like this: God made the world and us in it to have a joyful relationship, but we rebelled and brought brokenness and spiritual darkness and death to the world. God then chose to grab a few and make them his people—specifically the children of Abraham—to prepare to send His Son, Jesus, to save us from our sins.

God grabbed a bunch of people through Abraham. It’s kind of like God picking a puppy out of the litter; snatching one up and washing it off and taking it home. Or more like God grabbing a wild wolf out of a pack. That’s more like it. And God loves this wolf and retrains it, and holds it near even though it resists and bites and scratches. But the intention all along is not just to save one wolf. The intention all along is to use this wolf, with a retrained spirit and a reformed heart, to reach the rest of the pack. God uses the tamed wolf to reach the wild ones. So, through the children of Abraham, it was always

God’s intent to bless the whole world—and this came to a head with one descendant of Abraham and of David, named Jesus. Here’s how Isaiah said it when he was foreshadowing the ministry of Jesus: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6) See, Isaiah knew, and now Paul understands and preaches, that Jesus was not sent only to redeem the genetic descendants of Abraham. Jesus was sent to blow the whole operation open and save all who would call on His name from every nation and every people and every family, even to the ends of the earth. Because of Jesus, you get to be part of the people of God.

Look closely again. Who is Paul talking to? Verse 16: “Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: ‘Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!’” (Acts 13:16) Paul is talking to Jews in the dispersion, but also to “you Gentiles who worship God.” Later down he says, “Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.” (Acts 13:26) Now, do you follow? That “to us” is not just “us children of Abraham.” It’s all of us. The “us” is the Jews and the Gentiles and whoever else of all who might be listening! Anybody who seeks can find. All y’all! That’s the “us.” So, Paul concludes in verse 32-33: “We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled *for us*, their children, by raising up Jesus.” (Acts 13:32-33) Do you get the profound shift here? Paul, defender of the inheritance of the children of Abraham; Paul, staunch persecutor of the Christian message; Paul, who worked with all his might to keep sinners out of the fold of God’s special sheep. Paul, now says, “You, and you, and you, and you and you and you...any who will call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, all the promises made to our ancestors are fulfilled *for us*, their children, in Jesus. In Jesus, you are part of the family of God. In Jesus, you get to be a part of this story. In Jesus, you get to be the people of God.”

We live in an individualistic society. New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright says, “We have been so soaked in the individualism of modern Western culture that we feel threatened by the idea of our primary identity being that of the family we belong to—especially when the family in question is

so large, stretching across space and time. The church isn't simply a collection of isolated individuals, all following their own pathways of spiritual growth without much reference to one another... The church is the single, multiethnic family promised by the creator God to Abraham. It was brought into being through Israel's Messiah, Jesus; it was energized by God's Spirit; and it was called to bring the transformative news of God's rescuing justice to the whole creation." (*Simply Christian*, p. 200, 203)

We are rugged individualists trained to be self-sufficient and self-determined. It isn't *we*; it's *me*! It's up to me to achieve my success; it's up to me to fulfill my greatest potential; it's up to me to write my story—and it better be good! There's no pressure like the pressure of self-determination. My generation, we feel it. We've been given everything. Not like past generations that had to endure hardship, we grew up with arcades and slushies and air conditioning and Nintendo games. We had everything handed to us on a silver platter, and along with it the pressure: What are you going to make of all this, kid? You can write your own story, and it better be good! Have you ever felt that pressure?

Come on in. Sit down. God has a place for you here in His family. No pressure. No performance. Come on in. Rest. Fumble with the bulletin, wrestle with the kids, awkwardly shake hands with people you don't know... before you know it, something will happen. These people are all here to meet someone; they are all here to be with Jesus. Songs start up, but they're different. Even the new songs seem like they belong to another place than the songs we usually hear. People are earnest in prayer, and the Bible gets read. But it seems alive somehow, meaningful, relevant—somehow my story is part of this story. Somehow I belong here, and my story, my life... it belongs to God. Friends, said Paul, this is for you. In Jesus, you get to be the people of God.

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STUDY GUIDE

"People of God" • Acts 13:16-33

Start It

- People are often separated into introverts and extroverts. My 9-year-old asked: "Introverts are the ones that hate people, right?" He's an extrovert. It's not a matter of love and hate, but a question of where we get energized. Are you energized by contact with other people or does community mean expending energy for you?

Study It

- Read Acts 13:13-52.
- Paul's pattern was to approach the synagogues first, trying to convert the Jews to belief that Jesus, although crucified, is actually the promised Messiah. He had some success at this, but experienced a much greater response once he left the synagogues and began to speak to the "God-fearing" Gentiles in the community. In fact, it was agreed by the early church to make Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, and keep Peter, James, and John working with the Jewish communities. Why do you think Paul was more effective at reaching non-Jewish listeners? Does that surprise you?
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone... Each by itself has profound perils and pitfalls. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair."
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*
- Paul argues that the Christian way of life is one found in community, joining the people of God. Is that good news or bad news for you?

Pray It

Lord God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, help me to reach out to connect with the community of faith, help me to experience the communion of saints even as I experience communion with You through Jesus. Bless First Pres with a strong sense of community in Your name and by Your abiding presence, that we might not walk alone but share our burdens and cast over all things a banner of love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Live It

Do one thing to increase your commitment to a friendship in the church.