

Not Supposed to Work that Way

June 5, 2016

Galatians 1:11-24

Father John Francis Patrick Mulcahy is one of my ministry heroes and role models. Most of you know him as the humble and naïve priest from the television series, M*A*S*H. In my favorite Father Mulcahy episode, he is depressed because he feels useless. The doctors save lives, but he can't help them in that. Most of the personnel live pretty unspiritual lives; his Sunday services are poorly attended.

In the midst of that depression, Mulcahy is called to the bedside of a dying soldier. He begins to administer the Last Rites. This ritual was offered only when a person was surely dying. Father Mulcahy begins his work, and the soldier opens his eyes and speaks. The doctors are jubilant and begin giving the medical care they'd thought was useless.

Hawkeye Pierce looks at Father Mulcahy and asks, "What's that about not making a difference?" Astonished, the Father exclaims, "It's not supposed to work that way, you know."

That's a story about life in the church. It's a story about how the Holy Spirit works in our lives. It's a story about our reading from Galatians today.

It's not supposed to work that way, you know.

That was true for Saul of Tarsus. He was a zealous Pharisee, bent on rooting out and destroying nests of Jesus worshipers. His path was clear in his mind. Then he was called to preach the Good News of Jesus with the same passion and power. It is any wonder he spent more than three years wrestling with God to figure things out?

It wasn't supposed to work that way.

And when he got it figured out, he seemed to get it all wrong. He led people to Jesus without requiring them to become Jews first. That was just wrong. Paul's opponents assumed that he was preaching the gospel for dummies, gospel lite, a fast-food gospel. There's nothing easier than announcing that God wants you to be happy, rich and comfortable.

Gentile Christians? It wasn't supposed to work that way. But it did.

The first Christians in Jerusalem heard the stories about Paul. We can hear the utter astonishment in their report: "*The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.*" It wasn't supposed to work that way. But it did. It could only be the direct intervention of God's Holy Spirit. So they gave God glory and honor and praise.

Look at us. We are all willful, disobedient sinners. Left to our own devices, we ignore God and worship ourselves. That path can only lead to sorry despair and self-destruction.

And yet, here we are today—baptized and beloved children of God and followers of Jesus. We dare not take that for granted. Paul was called through God *grace*, and so are we. It's not supposed to work that way. But it does. And we give God glory and honor and praise.

That miracle of grace contains a call. When Saul of Tarsus died and Paul the Apostle was born, there was still much work to do. Three years is a long time to wrestle with God about meaning and purpose and direction. But sometimes that's what it takes.

Maybe you are wrestling with God about the meaning and purpose and direction of your life. Maybe your crisis contains a calling. If so, let's talk—you and me.

Of course, Emanuel Lutheran Church is in the midst of discerning our future meaning and purpose and direction. That's the main goal of our redevelopment process and the main reason I have stayed on here at Emanuel for another four years. We have been listening to the Holy Spirit to hear the call, and that listening continues.

After all, we are trying to see the direction for the next generation of mission and service. When we follow Jesus, things cannot remain the same. It's not supposed to work that way, you know.

When the Holy Spirit calls a person or a church, things change. Saul of Tarsus died, and Paul the Apostle was born. In the early church, the Holy Spirit broke down the walls separating Jews from Gentiles.

Dividing walls are still a challenge to the Christian movement. I rejoice that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has become a more inclusive family of faith. It has been painful to break down those walls, but no more painful than it was to include both Jews and Gentiles in the Church.

But walls of separation remain standing. Christian churches in this country remain divided by race and economic status. As we will hear later in Galatians, it's not supposed to work that way, you know.

Next week we will hear more about how God breaks down those walls and makes us one family by grace through faith. Let's pray...

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