

Welcome

A few weeks ago, a Gallup research poll announced that for the first time in US history, 'church attendance' had dropped below 50% of the population. The details were even more shocking for a lot of church folks because the 47% of Americans who attend houses of worship include synagogues and mosques - the 47% is even smaller than it looked like at first.

And as you might imagine, the split is generational, with more people leaving (or never entering) the church the younger they are. And I'm willing to bet you've heard a particular term that's gotten a lot of traction lately:

Deconstruction.

The word has its origins in the philosophy of French philosopher Derrida. But when we use it in church circles these days, we mean a person who is taking apart the faith they've received - maybe growing up in church or that simple faith we experience when we first meet Jesus.

Somewhere along the way, something happens. It could be a trauma we suffer. Maybe it's a prayer for healing that goes unanswered. Or coming face to face with the hypocrisy of a spiritual leader. I know folks for whom it was really engaging justice issues and finding the faith they had inadequate to speak to the massive inequalities we see in our culture. Sometimes there's not a great reason for it.

Whatever triggers our journey into deconstruction, it's a scary time. We're questioning things we thought were fundamental truths, confessions and commitments we've built our lives on. And now everything feels shaky and unpredictable.

Maybe the worst part of deconstruction is that it feels so lonely. There's no rhyme or reason to when deconstruction happens - it could be when you're a teen, or when you're in your seventies. And our church communities often shy away from these kinds of hard questions. In fact, plenty of us have been demonized or vilified for deconstruction questions.

But what we'll see this morning - in the story of the Apostle Paul, no less! - is that deconstruction is a good and necessary aspect of our faith journey. God welcomes us into spaces of deconstruction. Yes, welcomes us, because God is already in those spaces.

So this morning, some of us are right in the middle of that deconstruction space. I want you to hear me: that's good. You're welcome here, questions, doubts and all. Bring them with you today.

Some of us have made it through the wilderness of deconstruction. More than anyone, you know that deconstruction isn't a phase or a season. It's a new way of being faithful.

Some of us aren't deconstructing. If we're being honest, the questions and issues raised in those spaces we find threatening and dangerous. I want to assure you as well that those who

are deconstructing are not dangerous. They are not unfaithful. They are your siblings and you both need each other.

So let's all of us join together today, wherever we are, and worship the God who is both bigger than our doubts and also right in the middle of all those questions.

Message

We're observing the Easter season this year with a series called Church in the Wild. Hip hop fans will recognize that as a play on the song by Kanye West and Jay-Z, from their album Watch the Throne. On that song, they meditate

Human beings in a mob

What's a mob to a king?

What's a king to a god?

What's a god to a non-believer

Who don't believe in anything?

Will he make it out alive?

No church in the wild. -- "No Church in the Wild" by Jay-Z and Kanye West

My friend and hip hop scholar Dr. Daniel White Hodge observes that there's a progression in this verse, from human to mob to king to god. But then they ask the game-breaking question: what's even a god to a non-believer?

Does any of this matter to the person who just refuses to play by the rules? Does any of this affect the unbeliever who refuses to try to climb the ladder of success?

Kanye and Jay-Z call that space "the wild". The place outside the status quo. What we might call "out of bounds". The opposite of "wild" is "civilization". Where the streets are paved and the streetlights stay on. Where fences keep out the bad.

They insist there's no church in the wild.

But we're insisting that there is a church in the wild... because Jesus himself is wild. Jesus is radical, revolutionary, wild, untamed. And so should his church be. Jesus calls us to follow him into the Wild, to be good news for those who don't fit in, who claim the Wild as their home.

Welcome to the Wild.

On Easter, we saw that Jesus is a man of the wild, a revolutionary who was executed because he was too dangerous to be left alive, and yet who God raised to life to prove his wild, revolutionary way is good and beautiful and true. Next, we looked at the story of Stephen, a man labelled profane by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, a man whose profane faith was used as justification to lynch him.

Last week, we witnessed the profound reorientation of Saul, who, despite his deep faith, found himself fighting against Jesus. Though Saul considered Christians a threat, he was the real savage - until he met Jesus. It took courage both from Saul the oppressor and Ananias the oppressed to rescue and redeem Saul from his violence.

Today, we're going to hang out with Saul a while longer. Because he's one of the most famous humans in history. We know him better by his Greek name Paul, and he was largely responsible for spreading Jesus' good news out of Jerusalem into the larger Roman empire, planting churches that are still alive and well today.

And his experience on the road to Damascus is so provocative it's become one of those phrases that escaped the Bible - you can hear lots of people talking about having a 'Damascus road experience' whether they're a person of faith or not.

Turn with us to Acts 9.

What's the road from Saul to Paul? How does a guy go from lynching Christians to the most radical missionary on the team?

Well, believe it or not, it took a lot more than just that Damascus Road experience. It took Saul learning to navigate a deconstructed faith.

Yes, Paul, the guy who wrote 25% of the New Testament, the guy who spearheaded bringing Jesus' good news to all us Gentiles, that guy had to experience deconstruction before he could become the Paul we all know. Paul's experience of deconstruction should be all the proof we need that the process of pulling apart what we believe, testing it and finding new ways to be faithful isn't bad. It's good and holy and prepares us for the work God is preparing for us.

It's understandable that we miss Paul's journey because of how the book of Acts tells its story. You might remember last summer when our children's minister Vanessa preached on the genre of Acts. She reminded us that, first and foremost, Acts is a story about the Holy Spirit. Even Paul is a side character.

Because of that, Acts makes time jumps without bothering to let us in on it. Take this one in Acts 9. See if you can figure out how much time passes between Saul's conversion and his visit to Jerusalem:

Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"

All who heard him were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus' followers in Jerusalem?" they asked. "And didn't he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?"

Saul's preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. After a while some of the Jews plotted together

to kill him. They were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him, but Saul was told about their plot. So during the night, some of the other believers lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer! Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus.

So Saul stayed with the apostles and went all around Jerusalem with them, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. -- Acts 9:19–28 NLT

Okay, so Paul is in Damascus after his encounter on the road. He spends a few days there with the Christians, and then begins preaching. It causes problems so his new friends sneak him out of town and then BOOM - next sentence he's in Jerusalem.

It sounds like Saul left Jerusalem for Damascus, encountered Jesus, spent a week or two in Damascus, got run out of town and returned to Jerusalem.

But if we read Paul's own account of his experiences, we see that Acts glossed over a lot of time for Paul. How much? Try fourteen years.

Turn with us to Galatians 1.

Galatians is one of Paul's earlier letters. He's been a missionary for a while now, and he's planted a network of house churches in the Roman province of Galatia. A group of Jewish Christians has now come behind him and are trying to explain that Paul is too radical.

Which, can we pause and acknowledge how weird that is for a moment? The guy who was so worried about the Jesus people pulling everyone away from traditional Judaism is now the guy that the Jewish Christians are having to come along behind and say, whoa - don't follow him, he's way too radical!

That is essentially what Paul is arguing in his letter. He's having both to prove his credentials as an expert in Judaism and defend his position as an apostle appointed by Jesus. There's a lot going on here, but I want you to pay attention to how much time Paul says passed between his initial experience of Jesus and that meeting in Jerusalem:

Dear brothers and sisters, I want you to understand that the gospel message I preach is not based on mere human reasoning. I received my message from no human source, and no one taught me. Instead, I received it by direct revelation from Jesus Christ.

You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion—how I violently persecuted God's church. I did my best to destroy it. I was far ahead of my fellow Jews in my zeal for the traditions of my ancestors.

But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles.

When this happened, I did not rush out to consult with any human being. Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before I was. Instead, I went away into Arabia, and later I returned to the city of Damascus.

Then three years later I went to Jerusalem to get to know Peter, and I stayed with him for fifteen days. The only other apostle I met at that time was James, the Lord's brother. I declare before God that what I am writing to you is not a lie.

After that visit I went north into the provinces of Syria and Cilicia. And still the churches in Christ that are in Judea didn't know me personally. All they knew was that people were saying, "The one who used to persecute us is now preaching the very faith he tried to destroy!" And they praised God because of me.

Then fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas; and Titus came along, too. -- Galatians 1:11–2:1 NLT

Did you catch that? What Acts did from one sentence to the next, Paul says was a three year gap. And then, he takes another fourteen years before he sets out on his first missionary journey with Barnabas.

So let's be very clear here: from his experience on the Damascus road to the time he began serving as a missionary, the Paul we're all familiar with from his letters, was a period of almost twenty years.

A couple of observations here:

First, this shouldn't really surprise us. Paul saw himself as a deeply faithful man, one who had received the very best education available to a Jewish man in his day. He knew scripture better than any of us here.

And he missed the whole thing. He got God so wrong that he actually persecuted those who were following God become human.

Can you imagine how disturbing that would be?

Well, if you've ever begun to deconstruct you can. Maybe you grew up thinking Jesus was a Republican, and then you learned that Jesus is bigger than political parties and you wondered, "How did I get it so wrong?"

Or you always thought Jesus hated a certain group of people and then you met them and you realized they're actually beautiful, amazing people Jesus loves. And you wonder, "How did I get it so wrong?"

One I run into a lot is when people assume a lot of things are in the Bible that aren't. And when they begin to read for themselves, they wonder, "Wait, how did I get it so wrong?"

Or we experience a trauma - someone betrays us or we lose a loved one and all the verses and practices that once gave us real comfort feel hollow and insufficient.

On the Damascus Road, Paul came face to face with Jesus, with the living proof that he had gotten his faith all wrong. He imagined himself to be God's most faithful servant and instead he had become God's chief enemy.

That's about as big a shock as you can get.

And it took him some time to process it. Because Paul had to excavate his whole faith. Every assumption he'd ever made about who God is and how Scripture works and what faith looks like in the real world.

It took him almost twenty years to navigate those issues. To get to the place in his faith where he could once again step out in faith and speak on behalf of God.

So if you're in deconstruction and it's been a bit and you're feeling frustrated, give yourself a break. It took Paul nearly two decades.

Second, it's not that Paul was doing nothing in that twenty-year period. It's clear from both Acts and Paul's own letters that he was involved in the churches, preaching and using his influence for the fledgling movement. He was participating in the life of the church. He was learning this new kind of faith from other people who were on that same journey.

Here's where we need a lot of help: Deconstruction happens best in the church. It's messy, it's painful. It's scary and hard. But this is where it belongs.

I know this has been true for me. I was fortunate to begin my deconstruction while attending a Christian university where I had a number of Bible professors who weren't threatened at all by my questions - in fact, they encouraged me to explore them both in class and in the papers I wrote. And I had a group of friends who were in similar spaces, so we walked through these things together.

I won't pretend it was all sunshine and puppy dogs. I've experienced plenty of pain on my journey - both inside and outside the Church. But one of the things that first drew me to join the Catalyst community was that we strive to be a church that's safe for deconstruction.

We want to be like church in Damascus - a safe place for the Pauls among us to ask questions and figure out their faith - whether it's for the first time or the fifth time or the thousandth time.

Because there's no comparison between Saul the persecutor and Paul the missionary. But the path between the two was a long, winding one.

We want to be a church that holds space for them because we know we're all Saul at some point, on our path to becoming Paul. And the good news is that Jesus is with us every step of the way!

Communion + Examen

The people around Jesus' table had no clue!

What questions or feelings do I have in my relationship with Jesus?

How have I been engaging or ignoring those questions?

Am I using these questions to draw me into my church family or away?

How can I make space for deconstruction and reconstruction this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Ask good questions!