

“ALMOST PERSUADED.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 26:24-32

Acts 26:24-25, Governor Festus, this is completely crazy.

This is a pastor's nightmare. You're preaching along, really getting into the heart of your message when suddenly someone yells, "Pastor, you're crazy. You're out of your mind."

Paul was just warming up to his defense of the Gospel. He was coming to the best part, the part he loved the most, the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was his passion, this is why he suffered all he suffered, this is what made all the suffering worth it. This was the light for a dark world.

One wonders if as he became more passionate he might also have become more animated, moving and gesturing, chains clanging.

It appears Paul had more to say, but he was interrupted. Festus had heard all he could stand. And even though this is King Agrippa's trial, Festus interrupts it.

Festus was a pagan Roman politician. He was ignorant of Judaism and Christianity (25:19). He was an atheist Festus with no categories for the possibility of a god breaking into our world. This resurrection business was all a bunch of crazy talk, just religious superstition, not logical, not rational.

He was a materialist, this world is all there is, all you get. He worshiped the idols of this world, money, sex, and power. He was a hedonist who could not even begin to conceive of anyone choosing a life of suffering over a life of pleasure. That's just plain crazy.

Festus has many followers, many disciples, many right here in Lynden who would agree with him. They are in every walk of life, in every rank and position, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. We run into them every day at school, at work, at the store. My sons who went to LC had several friends who were self-proclaimed atheist, they denied the truth of Christ and Christianity.

They may be good people, respectable, hardworking, kind to their neighbors, but they have no religious faith and believe in nothing beyond this physical, temporal world. They might darken the door of a church for a wedding or a funeral, but that's it. This is all really a matter of complete indifference to them. They are proud to be independent, to think for themselves, free from religious crutches, they are masters of their fate, and captains of their soul if they believe they have one.

Festus attributes the things Paul said to madness, to insanity. Paul is crazy, off in the head. He as much says the Law and the Prophets are crazy.

He doesn't think Paul is a criminal who should be punished, just a lunatic who should be pitied and not paid any attention to. Paul is a mental health case.

But here is the irony, Festus attributes Paul's lunacy to his great learning. He somehow discerns that Paul is learned, intelligent, somehow reasonable and rational. He could quote the books of Moses and the prophets.

Christians are crazy, they believe some crazy things. A God coming to earth and becoming a man, a God laying down His own life for a bunch of sinners. A God dying and then rising from the dead. A God who calls us to follow Him and even suffer for Him.

But the truth is the Paul's of the world are the sane ones and the Festus' of the world are the ones living in a fantasy world that this life and this world is all there is.

Festus is blind to the truth. What has blinded his eyes? Pride, ego, power, position, fear of man, resentment, hatred, sin. Satan.

II Corinthians 4:4 The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

There is a warning here. Whenever the Word of God is being read, heard, explained, taught, when the light of the glory of the Gospel is being revealed, let us be sure to ask God to open our eyes, to enlighten our understanding, to quicken our minds.

David prayed:

Psalms 119:105 Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Word.

I wrote inside each of the 4th graders Bibles this statement: Every time you open your Bible pray and ask God to help you understand and believe the truth of His Word.

Every time I start studying and preparing a sermon, I stop and ask God to help me, to give me insight and discernment. These are spiritual things and they are only spiritually discerned. Without the Holy Spirit we cannot understand the things of the Holy Spirit.

Most times before I preach I pray what is sometimes referred to as a *prayer of illumination*, asking God by His Holy Spirit to help us hear and understand and believe.

If you are reading the Bible and it seems dull, dry, boring to you, it just doesn't make sense or seem relevant to your life, understand where the problem is. The problem is not

the living Word of God, the problem is our, dull, dry understanding. The problem is Satan has veiled the Word of God to us, he has blinded us to the light of the truth.

If we are having trouble understanding God, hearing God, making sense of the things of God, we are in trouble at the very core of our being. Eternity is at stake. Pray, ask for God's help.

There is a very real enemy trying to keep us from the truth, from the light, from the hope of the Gospel. Festus tried to stop the truth.

Notice, Paul is remarkably respectful to a man who has just called him crazy. Most excellent, Festus. He is not severe or harsh with him. He honors and respects the office even if he doesn't deserve it, after all the civil magistrates are God's appointed ministers.

Paul doesn't return evil for evil. Paul doesn't escalate the exchange. Paul doesn't take the bait, doesn't allow himself to be provoked. Such self-control is a mark of the Holy Spirit. He speaks civilly to one who didn't treat him that way.

I Peter 3:15 ... always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

But it is also true that in his respect he doesn't let the blasphemy of the Word of God go uncorrected, he defends the glory of God's Word. He doesn't defend himself, or get defensive about being called crazy. He simply says the Word of God is true and rational and reasonable, words of sober, eternal truth.

Acts 26:26-29, King Agrippa, almost persuaded.

Notice Paul turned away from the governor and makes his appeal directly to the king. "Festus, The king knows I am perfectly sane and what I am saying is completely true."

The king knows these things to be facts, not myths, not mysterious things hidden away. Even the nature of Paul's radical conversion was well known.

Paul expected better from King Agrippa because of his past and upbringing. The king was a half Jew raise a Jew. He was not uneducated, ignorant, head in the sand. He knows the Law and the Prophets. He knows the Scripture contains the oracles of God.

He knew the things foretold about the Messiah and about their fulfillment in Jerusalem in the person of Jesus, who was crucified, dead and buried. The king knows the events in Jerusalem.

Everything about Jesus was public, in full view of everyone, so much so everyone was talking about him. God made sure the cross was a public event, happening on a great

feast day, Passover. Christianity is not like the Masonic Lodge or some mystery religion. Everything is in the open, plain to.

“Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do. I know what is going on in your heart.”

Paul catches Agrippa off guard and puts Agrippa in an awkward position. If he says no then his reputation as a good Jew is ruined. If he says yes he believes, then he sees Paul is leading him to agree with Paul, so he deflects Paul’s question.

Notice the courage of Paul. Has any prisoner ever dared to address the court and the king in this bold and direct a manner?

Vs. 28, almost.

Agrippa is the opposite of Festus. Instead of thinking Paul crazy, he acknowledges Paul’s reasonableness and persuasiveness. Agrippa gives an involuntary confession.

ESV “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”

NKJV “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”

There is disagreement about the meaning of his statement, was it sarcasm or sincere?

Some think he is teetering on the edge of believing. He is almost persuaded by the clarity of Paul’s arguments, his connections from the OT to the Messiah, to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is the worst possible interpretation. Not because it is wrong, but because it may very well be true. Agrippa may be unguardedly honest and sincere. He may be in that very moment so close. The power of Paul’s passion and conviction moved him to within a hairsbreadth of surrendering, and that is what makes this a terrible tragedy.

Agrippa was somehow moved, almost thinking about maybe being persuaded, but he resists. Such is the hardness, stubbornness of the human heart to surrender in full obedience to God. Agrippa heard, he saw, he knew, but he couldn’t act.

Almost, Agrippa was almost persuaded, almost convinced, almost baptized, almost his name written into the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Agrippa is the one in chains, bondage to Satan, sin and death, than he does about his own shackles. Paul’s earthly bondage is nothing compared to any spiritual bondage.

Paul wishes for all to receive the same grace he received from Jesus, total deliverance from all his worst sins. He so believes what he believes, he wants everyone to believe it and calls them to be as he is.

This is love. He wishes for these lost souls to have the hope and promise of eternal life, of the riches of glory. He wanted the king's salvation more than the king's favor or pity.

In past sermons I have said "*tomorrow*" is one of the most dangerous words in the English language. Procrastination is a fatal practice. The word "*almost*" is just as tragic.

What good is almost? Let me ask you this, which do you think is better, to be almost persuaded or not persuaded at all? Scripture says it is better to never have heard or known, than to have heard and known and then ignored, or rejected, or denied the truth.

II Peter 2:21 For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.

Almost believing, almost having your sins forgiven, almost being born again, almost becoming a child of God, almost having eternal life, and almost going to heaven. What a tragedy!

An athlete runs and almost crosses the line first.

A shooter shoots and almost hits the mark.

A person jumps over roaring waters and almost makes it across.

Are there any people like Agrippa today? More than can be numbered. Are there any here this morning like Agrippa? Most certainly.

You know, you have heard over and over again. You know the Gospel story, the verses, you have seen and received the means of grace. You even know it is true, but have not taken that last step, to come out on the side of Christ, to confess Christ before men, to give up your own wills, to give up what you love to love God.

You don't want to give up our greed, envy, gossip, our lust, porn, our selfishness, doing what you want. You don't want to repent because to repent is to die to yourself.

Some are cowardly, they have a fear of man, of what others say or think. Almost.

Some have a love of the world that holds them back. Almost.

Some have a form of self-righteousness, they are not so bad as those bad people. They go to church. Isn't that enough. Almost.

Some have secret sin. They know in their hearts some darkness that they fear to bring into the light. Or they can't part with it, they are in bondage to it. Almost.

Move from almost to altogether (completely, totally, all in).

Don't feel what Agrippa felt and say what Agrippa said and then do what Agrippa did. Almost.

What would Agrippa and Bernice say to you right now if they could speak across the great chasm of hell that holds them now? If they had it all to do over again what do you suppose they would do now? Hell is filled with almost.

Are you almost persuaded?
Are you almost a Christian?
Do you almost believe?
Are you almost or altogether?

Conclusion and Application.

This past June marked the 50th anniversary of my conversion after my sophomore year in high school up at a Young Life camp. I have told some of that story before, I still remember it very clearly. I remember what I saw and what I heard. I went from almost persuaded to fully convinced, from almost to altogether. I know whom I believe.

I pray to God you all would be as I am, knowing Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. I call you to believe in the one we come here to worship. And if you do confess Jesus Christ, may you follow Him earnestly enough to be called crazy.

What a calling, what a privilege, what a blessed madness.

The story of Philip Bliss' hymn, Almost Persuaded.

A pastor in the 1800's by the name of Brundage was preaching on this text and concluded his sermon with these solemn words: "He who is almost persuaded is almost saved, but to be almost saved is to be entirely lost."

A man was in the congregation by the name of Philip Bliss. He was so deeply impressed by these words he wrote a hymn, based on the phrase "almost persuaded," and we are going to sing it now.

Prayer: Let's take a moment in silent prayer to get our hearts right with Jesus, with who He is and what He had done for us, and just how precious His blood is and what our lives mean in the light of His sacrifice. If the Holy Spirit is persuading you right now, respond, surrender.