

Pastor Liz Kuglin-Alyea's Sermon for June 28, 2026
St. Peter and St. Paul

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen
(1 Corinthians 2)

This Sunday, we gather with for a special Saints' Day: the celebration of St. Peter and St. Paul—two pillars of the early Church, whose bold witness continues to shape our faith today. Yet, in the scriptures, Peter and Paul were, in many respects, polar opposites.

Peter and Paul were both were gifted church leaders but so different from one another in background, education and temperament that in some of the early churches—most notably Corinth—people were divided into several rival parties depending on whether they followed Peter or Paul or Apollos or those who were named 'the wisdom party', who pretended to have superior knowledge and were therefore better than all the others. Yet in all things, both Peter and Paul kept drawing the early church back to Christ and him alone.

Paul was a graduate of one of the great cultural and learning centers of his day, Tarsus, in Asia Minor. He had been tutored by the famous leader of the Hillel School of Rabbis called Gamaliel (guh-MAY-lih-ehl). He was trained to speak and debate fluently in Greek. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures inside-out and he was someone who lived every minute of his life by the Jewish Law. He was also a Roman citizen and therefore entitled to all the privileges of that citizenship. While he never met Jesus, his conversion experience on the road to Damascus changed him dramatically from being a menacing persecutor of Christians to a defender of the faith. Paul didn't consider that his experience of God's forgiveness and acceptance through Christ Jesus was in any way inferior to the personal relationship with the earthly Jesus that Jesus' disciples had. After his conversion experience, Paul spent about three years in Arabia where he went through an intense time of prayer and study, eventually returning to Damascus and then to Jerusalem where he was introduced to the other apostles and the genuineness of his conversion was established. We will be most familiar with his missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean communities over the next ten years. He returned to Jerusalem, was imprisoned and eventually sent to Rome for trial as he was a

Roman citizen. Sentenced to death in about 67 CE, his citizenship allowed him to be beheaded rather than meet death by crucifixion.

We are much more familiar with Peter, knowing him from the gospel accounts. He was a Galilean fisherman, educated in the way of the sea but not in book learning, married, with a family to support. He had the privilege of having known and worked alongside Jesus during his earthly ministry. Peter emerged as a leader of the early disciples and later, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, of the other apostles on the Day of Pentecost. It was Peter who was the first to recognise that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. It was for this insight that Jesus declared that Peter would be the 'Rock' on which the church would be built. And indeed, Peter emerged as the central leader of the early church in Jerusalem. After about a decade in Jerusalem, preaching powerfully, performing miracles, and converting many, he eventually travelled to Rome where he established the Church there, becoming its first bishop. Around the year 64 CE, he was martyred during the persecutions under Emperor Nero. Tradition states that Peter requested to be crucified upside down because he did not consider himself to be worthy of dying the same way Jesus died. His tomb is located under the main altar of Saint Peter's Basilica.

Despite their shared faith, Peter and Paul clashed many times. Peter's main mission was concerned with converting people of the Jewish faith to this new expression of faith. He saw Jesus as the consummation of the Jewish Messianic hope and worked tirelessly to convince his fellow Jews of this. Paul, on the other hand, undertook missionary journeys and is known as 'the apostle of the Gentiles', the non-Jews. Within the original Jewish faith there had been no previous history of trying to make converts of non-Jews. But in his evangelism, he followed the urgings of the Spirit to bring the good news to all people.

Coming from such different experiences and understandings of who the gracious love of God was revealed to and who were to be recipients of this love, it's easy to see why Peter and Paul didn't immediately form a positive connection. It was many years before they made up their differences, fourteen years, in fact. It was at the Council in Jerusalem that they settled doctrinal disputes through discussion and compromise. Peter and Paul did not always

see eye to eye. And yet, they would come to respect and accept the particular ministries to which they were called.

Peter came to prominence as the leader of the church community. He became a point of unity for the whole church. Paul is remembered as the teacher of the church whose writings give us the theological underpinnings for our faith in Christ. As we remember these saints, we recall that they are always pointing us to Christ, our one foundation. We come to see through their lives that God leads and provides for us, even as God led and provided for them.

When we think about it, we, in this community of faith are so much like them—opposites in backgrounds, cultures, languages, work, interests, life experiences, opinions, callings. Yet, like Peter and Paul, we have a commonality that has drawn us all together—our faith in Christ Jesus and in him, to borrow the phrase, we live and work and have our being.

If you or I have any doubt about our ability to do the work Christ has called us to do as his followers, we might do well to sing the old hymn which we will sing as our offertory hymn: “There is a Balm in Gilead”.

The hymn is a traditional African American spiritual. Rooted in the suffering, hope, and resilient faith of enslaved believers, this hymn draws its central image from Jeremiah’s cry, *“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wounds of my [God’s] people?”* (Jeremiah 8: 22) The word ‘balm’ refers to a soothing, healing substance, like an ointment, made from the balsam poplar found in ancient Palestine east of the Jordan River. It also refers to that which provides emotional relief, comfort or reassurance. The hymn affirms that there is a balm, spiritual medicine that is able to bring healing for the ancient Israelites who must return to God, and whose suffering will be replaced by a new and enduring relationship with God. With the coming of Jesus into our world, the balm is the saving grace through Jesus the Christ. Jesus is the ultimate healer, offering hope in times of need and restoration to a right relationship with God. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, the balm has dual significance: practical medicine and spiritual healing.

In our lives of faith, no matter our life's experiences, whether difficult and hard to bear or easy and joy filled, there is a healing balm for us. If we become discouraged because we feel that our life's purpose is in vain - is futile or hopeless or pointless - the hymn reminds us that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us to lead, comfort, guide and teach us.

If we feel we don't have the gifts to proclaim the good news of God's gracious and forgiving love through Christ Jesus—if we don't have the gifts to preach like Peter or pray like Paul as the hymn says—we are reminded that we can open our mouths to tell others and our arms to show others how we have experienced the love of Jesus in our own lives and affirm that Jesus' love is for all people.

We have the work of love to do. We are not left alone to do it. Jesus has shown us the way to love, and the Holy Spirit directs us in that way. We are not to become discouraged or give up hope but look to Christ Jesus and trust his promises.

On this day as we remember and celebrate St. Peter and St. Paul, we give thanks for their lives, their mission, and the grace of God that worked through them—and still works through us. In remembering their faith, we're inspired to live out our own. When this service ends, and we go out through these doors, our work of love begins. Like Peter and Paul, we are “sent” into the world—called to proclaim the truth of God's gracious love made known to us in Christ Jesus by our words and through our actions, and to serve with courage. Like them, we stand firm on the one foundation of Christ. Like them, we are faithful in life, faithful in death.

Amen. Let it be so with us.