

“Set Apart”
Galatians 1:13-24
13th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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I have a question for you this morning.
No, it’s not, “Did you do your homework from last Sunday?”
Even though I’m curious, that’s not my question.

My question is this:
Do you know what it’s like to stand out?

Not because of a mistake you made, or something embarrassing
you did. I mean standing out—in the good sense, the best sense.

When, among a whole host of people, you are the one who is
recognized for something good?

The one who is thanked?
The one who is singled out, for an honor or an award,
because of your success and hard work?

How many of you enjoyed watching the Olympics a couple weeks
ago?

Did you know that in a recent poll taken in Great Britain, about
25% of the people surveyed said they thought they could qualify for the
Olympics if they trained really hard for the next four years?

As Seth Godin writes in a recent post:

“This is absurd. It’s the very absurdity of it that makes it common...Even if we had the talent, the resources and the time, the odds are so slim...[that it’s like winning the lottery].”¹

Why do so many people believe they could make an Olympic team?

Maybe it has something to do with the very natural human wish, the desire, the hope...to stand out.

Paul knew about this.

He writes in our text for today:

“I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.”

Paul knew about the desire to stand out.
But then something happened to him.

And he writes:

“But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles...”

Did you catch that?

You see, the movement in this text is from **STANDING OUT**—
to being **SET APART**...

Let me hit the pause button here.

¹ [The paradox of lottery thinking | Seth's Blog \(seths.blog\)](https://seths.blog)

Sometimes people assume that the movement in this text is Paul switching from Judaism to Christianity, converting from one religion to another religion.

But that's not it at all.

We have a painting here at Westminster...or a copy of a famous painting, I should say. It's hanging on the wall in the Friendship Court, it's by the 16th/17th century artist Caravaggio. It's a painting of Paul, and it's called, "Conversion on the Way to Damascus."

But conversion isn't really the right word.

Paul understood what happened to him—not as switching or converting from one religion to another religion—but as experiencing a revelation WITHIN the Jewish faith that he had always practiced.

For example, in our first text for today, you heard the prophet Isaiah lay out a description of the call that God gave to Israel. It's the very same framework that Paul uses to describe his call.

Says Isaiah:

"The Lord called me before I was born...
I will give you as a light to the nations...."

And what does Paul write in our text?

"But when God, who had set me apart before I was born...
so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles..."

It's the same language!

Paul's borrowing not only from Isaiah, but also Jeremiah.

Do you remember the call of Jeremiah?

"Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’”

In other words, Paul still understood himself as a faithful Jew when he received this mysterious revelation from God.

What’s new is Paul’s understanding of what he’s been set apart to do. But even that...even that understanding, in certain ways, falls within the tradition of his Jewish faith.

You see, when Paul says that he has been “set apart,”
he’s not aligning himself with Olympic athletes.

He’s aligning himself with the prophets of old.

And what do we know about those prophets?
Were they welcomed?
Were they cheered?
Did the people shout, “Yeah, good ol’ Jeremiah is here!”???

No...you remember, I hope, what happened to Jeremiah.
He was imprisoned.
Put in stocks.
Left to die in a muddy cistern.
All because he was set apart by God.

According to Paul, being set apart no longer means moving up.
It means moving down.
It means being willing to suffer, to sacrifice to show the love of
God.

Here’s how he describes it to the Corinthian congregation:

“Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers,
 danger from bandits,
 danger from my own people,
 danger from Gentiles,
 danger in the city,
 danger in the wilderness,
 danger at sea,
 danger from false brothers and sisters;
 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.”

According to Paul, that is what it means to be SET APART by the living God.

To make sacrifices that allow the love of God to shine through...

So my question today isn't whether you know what it's like to stand out...my question is whether you know what it's like to be set apart.

Because you are!

Every single soul in this room has been set apart by God, and given a job to do.

Let me invite you to consider a few points about being set apart.

1. Being set apart isn't about you.
 It's about God. It's about God choosing you.
 And that's why you're here today.

You see, far too often, I think we get it in our heads that our presence here is our idea. Like we each chose to be a part of Westminster Presbyterian Church. After all, some of you may have joined Westminster because of our excellent children's ministry. And others were drawn here by the superb youth ministry. And others were moved by the outstanding music ministry. And besides all that, the adult education classes are second to none.

And Westminster is growing. And it's inclusive.
 And it's full of generous people.
 And we have really outstanding parking...
 Just wanted to see if you were still paying attention.

You may think that's why you're here.
 And I suspect some part of that is true.

But according to Paul, it's not the whole truth, or the deepest truth. According to Paul, what it means to be God's church is that first and foremost, it wasn't our idea!

It was God's idea.

Just like God chose Paul long ago to play an important role in the 1st century church, God has chosen you to play a role in the 21st century church...

That's point #1.
 And point #2?

We are SET APART by God to be Christ's hands and heart in this world—to live sacrificial lives of love, not for our own purposes, but for God purposes.

Not to be fed, but to feed others.
 Not to be served, but to serve others.

Not to be recognized, but to recognize others, to see and pay attention to those people whom our society would prefer to ignore.

That's what this "set apart" business is all about...

I recently read about a church in Ukraine.

It was a very small church, 25 people, and before Russia invaded, it was worship services and prayer meetings. But after the war began, as their pastor, Sasha Riabyi, puts it, "we woke up."

"We opened the doors of the church. It's not only for services and prayer meetings now...people come for projects, to play games, to interact with each other, to have a meal together...pray together. [We're] now open six days a week...And we grew."

70 children present each week.

300 adults regularly walking through their doors every week.

"We sit at small tables, and share food and conversation. You cannot imagine how much grief and sorrow is in their hearts. People start talking and can't stop....Many have become close friends."

Do you know what Sasha Riabyi says about pastoring a church in the midst of a war on his homeland?

"We're lucky to live in Ukraine during this time..."²

Lucky?

To be God's church in a place where missiles could strike any moment?

² Sasha Riabyi and Danny Burrows, "A Church in Ukraine Spreads Hope in Wartime," Plough Quarterly, [A Church in Ukraine Spreads Hope in Wartime by Danny Burrows and Sasha Riabyi \(plough.com\)](https://plough.com).

I don't know if I would use the word—lucky.

I do know this:

It sounds like Sasha Riabyi's congregation knows what it means to be set apart.

Do you know what one of the most beautiful parts of being set apart by God is?

God's power and grace can show up in you, no matter what situation you find yourself in right now.

If you're tired today, if you're worried about one of your children today, it doesn't disqualify you.

God can still work through you.

If you're battling an illness right now, if you're anxious about your future right now, God still needs you.

Even in conditions of cruelty and evil in this world, God promises that God's love and God's power is still setting people apart and giving them a job to do...

In the second half of the 20th century, the late Rabbi Hugo Gryn was perhaps the most prominent rabbi in Great Britain. He was also a survivor of the Nazi horrors during WWII.

As a teenage boy, Gryn and his father were in a concentration camp together.

Each day, the prisoners were given a very small portion of bread, but if you held onto it—especially if you were a child—it could be stolen at night.

So Gryn's father suggested that he keep his son Hugo's portion. To prevent it from being stolen.

Then, in the morning, his dad would give his son a generous slice of bread. And again at midday, Hugo received from his father a generous slice of bread. If they worked in different places in the camp, his father would wrap some bread for Hugo in a piece of cloth, so that he could have it with his soup.

As an adult, reflecting on that time, Hugo Gryn writes:

For many months my gratitude and relative well-being blinded me to the fact that my three thick slices of bread were far more [than what my father was getting.]

In other words, his father was giving his own bread to Hugo.

When, at last, I refused to take more than my share, he assured me that he was only doing what any father would do...

Hugo Gryn's father died shortly after being liberated from the camp. His son, Hugo, went on to live a full, and fruitful, and generous life of faith, following God and overseeing synagogues and teaching others about God to the end of his days.³

How does that happen?

How does one go through the horror of the Holocaust, lose one's father to the Holocaust, survive the Holocaust in part because of your

³ *Three Minutes of Hope: Hugo Gryn on the God Slot*, edited by Naomi Gryn, New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010.

father's sacrificial giving, and THEN...come out with one's faith in God intact on the other side?

I don't know.
I do know this.
It has something to do with the power of God.

Hugo Gryn...was called by God.
Set apart by God.
And so are you.

You have no idea—
when you're hospitable to a stranger,
when you're generous with a neighbor,
you have no idea what God might be doing with your life.

So Paul's word to us today is this:
Take a chance with the grace that God has given you.
Take a risk with the love that God has showered on you.
Make a sacrifice that you never DREAMED you could make.

Speaking of sacrifices, those who were here last Sunday, do you remember when I suggested the possibility of changing your seat every Sunday from now through Thanksgiving, so that you could meet new people and build that sense of belonging here at Westminster?

Of all the ideas I've ever shared with you from this pulpit, that one received the MOST RESISTANCE...so maybe changing your seat isn't the sacrifice that some of you are called to make.

But something is.
God has a job for every person in this room.

Don't worry if you don't know how it will turn out.
Just step outside the comfort zones of your faith—and see what happens.

Remember...when Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, he had no idea that we'd be reading his words today. He had no clue how the love and power of God would work through him.

That's the other thing it means to be set apart by God.
To be CLUELESS—how many of you like being clueless?
Doesn't matter.
Because you are.

We all are clueless.
Utterly unable to predict—
what God's love and power can do through you...

Amen.