They Say It Happened in New York City Forty Years Ago

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They say it happened in New York City some forty years ago. At least it was then that I first heard the story. A mouse was being chased by a cat. It had been a close call, but finally the mouse managed to hide in a drainpipe. He was hiding there trying to catch his breath, when much to his relief, he heard a dog growl just outside the drainpipe. Now the coast would be clear! So relieved and confident, the mouse stepped out from his shelter, only to have the cat pounce on him at once. "Bbbbbut," said the mouse, "I heard a dog growl. I thought you would be gone!" To which the grinning cat replied with a smirk: “Haven’t you heard that in order to survive in New York you have to be bilingual?”

What was true of New York City forty years ago is also true today, not only of New York and Los Angeles, but of the entire United States, and of much of the modern world. In my own state of Georgia, in the deep South, the land of magnolias and of "Gone with the Wind," there are about half a million people who speak at home a language other than English. That amounts to 10% of the entire population of the state. Ten years ago, that figure was about 5%. And that population speaks a total of 115 different languages. The second largest Mexican city in the world is Los Angeles; and the second largest Puerto Rican city is New York. In the Presbyterian seminary where my wife used to teach, an institution well known for its long-standing connections with

Scottish Presbyterianism, the most common name is not McDonald, not even Smith or Brown, but Kim. And, speaking of McDonald, one of the most surprising sights in Beijing is a huge McDonald's where any of you would feel completely at home --except that some people would be eating French fries with chop sticks!

We have all heard and read much about the Rio Grande and about how easy it is to cross it. Some time ago, a major newspaper published a series of articles on population movements between Europe and North Africa, under the suggestive title of "The Mediterranean: Europe's Rio Grande." The truth is that we no longer live in a world with clearly defined borders. It used to be a hundred years ago that, if you were in Rangoon, you would expect to hear only Burmese; and, if you were in Chicago, you certainly would not expect to hear Korean, or Afrikaans, or Portuguese. Now we are no longer surprised to be in a restaurant, and to hear all around us conversations that we cannot understand.

In many ways, this is similar to the situation of the world in which the Christian Gospel took its first steps. The story of Pentecost in Acts 2 tells us of all sorts of Jews who at the time were in Jerusalem. There were Jews from Cappadocia, and from Phrygia, and from Mesopotamia, and from many other places. And what was true of Jews was also true of other populations. There were Greeks in Spain, and in Egypt, and in North Africa; and there were Syrians in Egypt, and in Rome, and in Persia.

Such a cosmopolitan environment is exhilarating. There are new opportunities for discovery at every turn. The old restrictions and taboos no longer hold sway. Indeed, there were even people in the Greco-Roman world of the first century who collected religions, much as people today collect baseball cards. And there are people today who do exactly the same thing.

But that environment is also frightening. The old certainties are gone. Gone are also the old systems of cultural and psychological support. If you are a Pakistani living in Atlanta, you can easily make yourself understood in English, for most people speak that language. But also, no one really understands you, for no one shares your experiences and background. Even other Pakistanis who have come to Atlanta from a different area of Pakistan, or by another route, or through a different set of circumstances, do not really understand you.

This sense of lostness in a foreign world that is not really foreign can be overwhelming. A few years ago, we went to China with a group of seminary students and professors. We had been gone for almost two weeks when we finally arrived in Beijing. Almost as soon as we arrived, some in our group made a beeline for McDonald's. I was surprised and even a little disgusted. We had all kinds of delicious foods available to us. Peking duck. Shark-fin soup. Braised shrimp. Yet, some among us craved a Big Mac with French fries! Now I realize that it was not just a physical craving, but also a spiritual and cultural one. And I must confess that, if instead of hamburgers and French fries, there had been black beans and rice, I too would have run to

McDonalds. Much as we enjoy the different and the exotic, we all need the familiar to give us a sense of roots, of belonging.

That was precisely what was lacking in the cosmopolitan world of the first century, and what many find also lacking in the cosmopolitan world of the twentieth. In a world that has become exhilaratingly cosmopolitan, varied, and complex, there is something in all of us that craves for the old certainties, for familiar languages and faces. We wish the old borders still stood. Indeed, there are among us some who are so fearful of the new world, of the way others impinge upon us, that we constantly strive to create new borders. We move to segregated neighborhoods. We insist on the traditional values of our own culture as if only they were valid. We develop all sorts of protective covers around us. We try to hold back the world, the multiple world that impinges upon us. Yet, even as we do that we know that we are in a losing fight, that the world of the future is not like the world of the past, that new realities are being born which do not fit into our old schemes.

There were in the first century many who also felt that way. Think of the Sanhedrin and how it reacted to the preaching of the Gospel. Or think of those who wondered if anything good could come out of Nazareth. Or think of those who unleashed the first persecution against Hellenistic Christians.

Or think of Saul of Tarsus, who is the main character in the Scripture portion that has been read. Saul who persecuted the followers of the Way. Saul who left for Damascus breathing death and murder against the disciples of Jesus.

I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard a preacher say that Saul gave up his former name, and took the name of Paul, when he became a Christian. I have even heard eloquent sermons as to how Saul the persecutor fell down to earth and up rose Paul the Christian, Paul the missionary, Paul the apostle.

It is very pretty, very traditional, and very inspiring. The only problem is that it isn't true. Read again the book of Acts. Saul meets the Lord on the way to Damascus. Saul gets up and goes into the city. Ananias is told to go visit Saul. Saul goes to Jerusalem. Barnabas meets Saul. Barnabas introduces Saul to the twelve. Saul goes to Tarsus. Saul comes to Antioch. Saul is among the leaders of the church in Antioch. The Spirit tells the leaders of that church to set aside Barnabas and Saul for a special task. Barnabas and Saul set out on their first missionary journey...
Then, almost surreptitiously, in the passage that has been read, Luke refers to "Saul, who is also Paul." And from that point on, throughout the entire book of Acts, Saul has become Paul.

The fact of the matter is that Saul, like many others in his time, had more than one name. One was the name in his traditional culture—in the case of Saul, Judaism. He was named Saul after the great leader of his own tribe of Benjamin to which he belonged. But he also had a Roman

name, a name for use outside of Jewish circles. That name was Paul. The same is true of one of the companions of Paul who, like him, was both a Jew and a Roman citizen—the one who in Acts is known as Silas, in the Epistles becomes Silvanus.

As long as Saul/Paul is in a basically Jewish environment, Luke refers to him as Saul. Now, as he begins his mission to the gentiles, and at the precise moment when Saul is about to give his first witness before a gentile, Luke, almost offhandedly, refers to "Saul, also known as Paul."

If there is a difference between Saul and Paul, that difference does not revolve around the experience on the road to Damascus but around the mission to the gentiles.

True, the two are connected. On the road to Damascus, before meeting the Lord, Saul, the proud Jew who has received the best Jewish education, is persecuting these false Jews who have allowed themselves to be led astray by heresy. They have been led to heresy, in part at least, because they are not real and strict Jews. They are Hellenists, people from the diaspora who have been influenced by pagan culture and customs, and who now are quite ready to embrace a new sect.

It has often been pointed out that this persecution of which Acts speaks is not against all Jewish Christians, but only against those Jewish Christians who are also of "Hellenistic" background, those who could not claim to be strict Jews brought up in Palestine.

What we often miss is that it was other Hellenistic Jews who unleashed the persecution against Hellenistic Jewish Christians. In Acts 6:9 we are told that those who started the persecution by accusing Stephen were Hellenistic Jews: Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others from Cilicia and Asia. Apparently, they were afraid that they too would be tainted by the accusation of heresy against Stephen and other Hellenists who had become Christian. Therefore, they make it very clear that they are true, strict Jews, and they do this by unleashing persecution against those from among their ranks who have become Christians.

Saul himself was from Cilicia. He too was a Hellenistic Jew. We do not know how long he had lived in Jerusalem. Still, he was known as Saul of Tarsus and therefore as a Hellenistic Jew—one of those who did not quite belong, who were often suspect of not obeying the law as strictly as did the Jews from Jerusalem. (One even wonders if he might have been among those "from Cilicia" who, according to Acts 6:9, conspired to have Stephen brought before the Sanhedrin.)

In any case, "Saul" is a good Jewish name. It was the name of the first king of Israel, the great hero of the tribe of Benjamin. The man making his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, with letters authorizing him to initiate proceedings against any disciples that might be found there, must have been proud of his name. It was a good Jewish name; not a Greek one, such as Stephen. For someone from Tarsus, in far-away Cilicia, this must have been something to cling to in the social environment of Judea—a badge of honor and of acceptance.

But that was some time ago. Now, in Acts 13—the text that has been read—the path that began on the road to Damascus takes a new turn. Saul is now going on a mission to the gentiles. Suddenly he finds himself facing a false prophet of Jewish origin and standing before a Roman proconsul. This is the real beginning of his missionary career among the gentiles. And it is precisely this moment, this beginning of his missionary career, that Luke chooses to let us know that this Saul is "also known as Paul."

You see, Saul/Paul is part of that human mass of the first century. Jewish, but not purely Jewish. A native of Tarsus, but also a Roman citizen. As a Jew proud of his Jewish heritage, not quite ready to accept his Hellenistic background. Actually, so eager to deny that background, that he was at least a consenting witness to the death of Stephen.

If the Alexandrines, Cyrenians, and people from Asia and Cilicia who set up the first persecution did so because they had to prove their true Jewish allegiance, one can imagine this Saul, from Tarsus in Cilicia, going to Damascus, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," and doing so because he was Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, a true Jew, no matter what his connection with Tarsus and with the Hellenistic Diaspora.

And in this thirteenth chapter of Acts, Luke is telling us that in his mission to the gentiles Saul came to terms with Paul, that he was able to claim his dual belonging—and therefore, in a certain sense, his own rootlessness. Furthermore, it is because Saul is also Paul, because the

Jewish scholar is also capable of moving in Hellenistic and Roman circles, that he becomes the great apostle to the gentiles.

That is a situation with which many of us can relate. I have a friend whose name is Jesse. At least, that is what his English-speaking friends call him. When he was born, he was called "Jesús." But then he went to school. His teacher took a look at his name, and said, "You can't be Jesus!" So Jesús became Jesse. I have another friend, María Luisa, who is also Mary Lou. I have still another friend, Seung Lee, who is also Arthur Lee. Just as Saul was also Paul.

There have been times when Jesús has given up and simply called himself Jesse. The same with María Luisa. And with Seung Lee. It is so painful not to belong! It is so painful to belong to two different worlds and therefore to none! I can easily understand this Jew from Tarsus, Saul, trying to prove to others, as well as to himself, that he was as good a Jew as any other, and therefore "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."

To have to live with such a complicated reality is not a comfortable situation. That is why there are so many attempts to close the border, to have a single language, to make certain that we are pure, to insist on the traditional values of our own particular culture.

And yet, we know that such is not the way to the future. We know it first of all because the world around us is changing. We know it also because that is not what as Christians we have

been promised. We know it because what made Saul the great apostle to the gentiles was precisely the fact that Saul was also Paul, that the Jew was also at home in Greek, that the Greek-speaking Jew was also a Roman citizen.

So here we stand today. A student body that would probably have surprised most educators a hundred years ago. A student body where the Pérez are just as common as the Smiths, and the Kims are just as common as the Browns. We may take this to be simply an accident of history, or the result of some shrewd recruiting on the part of the university, or something that we simply have to accept because that is what is happening in our society.

Or we may see in this very multiplicity a glimpse and a promise of the future. An indication that, at least here, the Church has begun to learn what that mouse in New York City knew twenty years ago: that to survive today, to survive as a viable agent of mission, the Church must be bilingual, or rather multilingual—a sign of what this institution and indeed the entire church is called to be, a place where Saul and Paul meet, where Jesse can also be Jesús, where people learn to build bridges across races, across cultures, across languages. For if we are to be in mission to the twenty-first century, neither Paul nor Saul will suffice. It will be necessary to move across the various cultural divides in our emerging society, and to witness to Christ in a myriad different contexts.

It is for that reason that I celebrate this occasion at this school: because what we enjoy here is a glimpse of that Kingdom of God where they shall come from the East and from the Wet, from the North and from the South, and sit at the table of the Lord. Therefore, let us rejoice that, at least here, the church is preparing for the future which God has promised and is bringing about. Because here Saul can also be Paul, Mary Lou can also be María Luisa, and Seung Lee can also be Arthur Lee.

So be it!