

## Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'

## Healed by the Enemy

There is a very famous parable that Jesus tells, it's one that I preach on at least once a year, and it's called the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And what I particularly like about this parable is that it does more than challenge us to love those we may call our enemies (and the Jews most certainly considered the Samaritans their enemies); the parable forces us to look at our enemies as our heroes, as the people who come to our rescue when our lives depend on it. Jesus could have told a Parable of the Good Jew and described a Samaritan who is robbed and beaten and rescued by a good Jew who tends to his wounds, puts the Samaritan on his own mule, takes him to an inn, and pays the innkeeper to look after him, and his audience would have easily taken the message to heart: "We Jews are good people who need to take care of those poor Samaritans." But that's not the way Jesus told it. Jesus forced his Jewish audience to

see the people they despise and look down upon as virtuous, compassionate people. Jesus humanizes the people that his audience tends to dehumanize.

Well, in today's scripture lesson, Jesus brings this Parable into Real Life. Today's lesson is the story of Paul's conversion. Paul is blinded by a bright light and asked by Jesus, "Why are you persecuting me?" Paul continues to Damascus and there remains blind and fasts for three days. Then Jesus actually instructs one of his disciples named Ananias to go and tend to Paul. In essence he instructs Ananias to become "the Good Samaritan" in Paul's mind. And the self-righteous Paul is made to be healed by one of the people he despises. It certainly would have been simple enough for Jesus to restore Paul's sight just as simply as he caused Paul to lose his sight. But Jesus, always the teacher, wants to give a real life lesson to both Paul and Ananias. Because Jesus' ultimate desire is for all people, regardless of their differences in beliefs, to come to care for one another and appreciate one another and recognize their need for one another. Ananias does not want to care for Paul; Paul is a murderer, a threat to people like Ananias and someone who is best avoided. Paul would probably prefer that someone other than a Christian restore his sight: it's one thing to realize that you're wrong, but it's even harder to be cared for by the very people you've wronged. Ananias doesn't just lay his hand on Paul and heal him; Ananias calls him "Brother". In this encounter, Jesus brings Ananias into contact with the person he fears the most, and he brings Paul into contact with the people he hurts the most. And something that was broken got fixed.

I believe that Jesus is continuing to fix what is broken today, bringing together the victim and the victimizer, the good guy and the bad guy. Today is Native American Ministries Sunday, and speaking as a white American I must acknowledge that my ancestors, generally speaking, were at war with Native Americans, generally speaking. And I must accept that, in order to assuage the moral discomfort that the memories of atrocities committed against Native Americans could create, in order to make my conscience feel better, the media (particularly old movies and television shows) portrayed Native Americans as unpredictable savages that had to be subdued or annihilated. Such dehumanizing depictions of the Native American have made Native Americans feel a lot of mistrust for white Americans. It may also have something to do with the high rate of depression and suicides among Native Americans. Today is the Sunday that the United Methodist Church recognizes the tremendous needs in the Native American community and provides us a convenient way to address them through a special offering. But a special offering is not enough. Indeed a special offering, if given for the wrong reason, can actually do more to damage our relationship than to heal it, if we perceive ourselves as the great white heroes coming to someone else's rescue.

That's not what Jesus wants. Jesus wants us to see good in others and to admit the bad in ourselves. White folks like me may not be personally guilty of oppressing and dehumanizing our Native American neighbors, but as a people, as a nation, we need to face the sins of our past and to commit ourselves to being better than we were in order to move forward. Because even though we weren't shooting the guns at Wounded Knee in 1891 and we weren't directing those "Cowboy and Indian" movies of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, we are Americans, and if we are to become an ever-more-perfect nation we must take ownership of our history, good and bad.

And of all the things that could make us “proud to be American,” what should make us the proudest is our own diversity. We have a history of living in close proximity to neighbors who speak different languages, wear different clothes, eat different foods, worship in different temples, and somehow we’ve managed to get along with one another. Yes, the law has a lot to do with that, but we have to remember that the law has also been a tool to isolate, to oppress, to keep some in power and others on the margins. I believe that what has made America a successful melting pot and a great nation is a Spirit of God that prompts us to approach those who are different from us with apple pies and not machine guns, with cookies and not clubs, with compassion and respect, not contempt or indifference.

Because when we start to look at other people as wonderfully created and gifted we see what is good in them and use it to make ourselves better. I’ve shared some Native American hymns and prayers this morning that, for one thing, seem to express a real appreciation for creation, and from that appreciation we may come to better appreciate creation. Many Native American tribes are what are called matrilineal, meaning that the children take on the mother’s name, that the husband moves in with the wife’s family. And in those tribes women have a lot of influence in determining who their chief will be. I sometimes wonder if the European American women might have been inspired to speak out for their rights, their right to vote, their right to own property, their right to equal pay for equal work. If we insist on demonizing those who are different from us we will never be able to see what is beautiful in them. We’ll never learn, and we’ll never grow. But if we see ourselves as interdependent and we see that none of us are as complete as we could be, if we welcome the stranger and open ourselves to the good within them, we will be healed through Jesus Christ.