

Acts 9:1-19a

All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.

He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?"

He said, "Who are you, Master?"

"I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next."

His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn't see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground, found himself stone-blind. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. He continued blind for three days. He ate nothing, drank nothing.

There was a disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Master spoke to him in a vision: "Ananias."

"Yes, Master?" he answered.

"Get up and go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He's there praying. He has just had a dream in which he saw a man named Ananias enter the house and lay hands on him so he could see again."

Ananias protested, "Master, you can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he's shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us."

But the Master said, "Don't argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews. And now I'm about to show him what he's in for—the hard suffering that goes with this job."

So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul's eyes—he

could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.

Healing and Wholeness 5: Divine Empathy

(Show “Worlds Apart” Heineken commercial)

So there’s the message. Drink beer. Sit down and talk to one another. We all have opinions that we feel very strongly about; if you sat down with me for five minutes you would know that I have strong views that many would disagree with. And the truth is that we could sit down with one another and discuss these views for hours, and we may or may not persuade one another to accept one another’s views. Yet we can celebrate the fact that we CAN sit down with one another and talk for hours about the things we don’t agree on, and we can be friends at the end of it all, and we don’t have to have a beer for that to happen.

God has endowed us with empathy. I always emphasize that we are created in God’s image to love and be loved, and on the first week of this worship series I spoke about the fact that suffering is a fact of life, and that suffering itself is evidence that we are created in God’s image – because we feel not only for ourselves but for others as well; we don’t just feel pain when our lives are in turmoil or when we are suffering, we feel it when other’s lives are in turmoil, when others are suffering. In fact we sometimes feel more pain when others are going through hardship than when we ourselves suffer the same hardship. THIS IS A GIFT FROM GOD – that we are so connected one to the other that we hurt when others hurt, we rejoice when others rejoice. So much of what makes church so special for people is that WE ARE PEOPLE SO BOUND TO ONE ANOTHER – NOT BECAUSE WE ALL BELIEVE THE SAME THINGS BUT BECAUSE WE ARE INEXTRICABLY BOUND TO ONE ANOTHER BY DESIGN. WE REJOICE AND WE MOURN AND WE CELEBRATE AND WE SUFFER **TOGETHER**. We can do this despite our differences of opinion and political views BECAUSE God has made us in his image to be so connected to one another.

...You know one of the biggest struggles we face with our faith in God is over the question of suffering: why is there so much pain and suffering in this world? And I cannot answer that question in any complete way, but as I think about suffering and the feelings that we have for one another, I realize that suffering brings us

closer to one another. True story: during World War 2 German Lieutenant Franz Stigler, one of Germany's best pilots, was ordered to shoot down an allied B-17 bomber, the last kill he needed to earn Germany's highest medal of valor. But he didn't do it. As he approached the plane, he noticed that it was flying unusually close to the ground. The rear was riddled with bullet holes, and he could see that the men inside were injured and panicked. Gunning them down now, Stigler decided, wouldn't be a military operation. It would be murder. Flying alongside the bomber's wings, Stigler signaled to the pilot and flew them all the way across the North Sea, where they could fly to safety. By making sure that German gunners didn't shoot down the American plane, Stigler saved the men's lives. Stigler only had to witness the suffering of those men inside that B17 bomber and he chose to disobey direct orders and instead put his own life at risk in order to help his ENEMY get home safely. The suffering we witness prompts us to relieve suffering, and that draws us closer to one another.

In today's lesson, Jesus brings two men, who by all outward appearances would seem to be enemies, closer to one another. Jesus coordinates a meeting between Saul, the zealous Jew who is out to eradicate his religion of this fanatical "Christian" wing that is putting his whole religion at risk of extermination by the Roman authorities, and Ananias, a disciple of Jesus and one of these radical Christians who Saul is trying to snuff. Now before Ananias meets Saul, Jesus introduces himself to Saul as the one who he is persecuting – that's interesting, isn't it? Jesus doesn't ask Saul why he is persecuting *his disciple*; he asks Saul why he is persecuting *him*! Here we see that divine empathy in the divine Christ who empathizes with US! Blaise Pascal writes that Jesus will be in torment even to the end of the world, because if we are suffering, he is suffering. Jesus himself feels the pain of those who are being persecuted as if it was he himself being persecuted; such is Jesus' connection with all of humanity. We remember what Jesus says in the 25th chapter of Matthew: "Inasmuch as you've done this to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you've done it to me." This is the divine empathy that connects God to each of us, and each of us to one another.

But things get in the way of those connections, don't they? By many accounts we are living in one of the most polarized conditions that our nation has ever experienced – right against left, liberal against conservative, and the language gets far worse – "socialist" against "classist," "nationalist" against "globalist." And such labels serve to dehumanize us and separate us. We see each other not as

individual human beings but as stereotypes of the ideologies we reject, and so we reject the individual. But Jesus doesn't discriminate; it's clear that Jesus represents something to Saul that is odious and radical, but Jesus introduces himself to Saul not as the theologian who disputes the legalism of the Pharisees; he introduces himself as the one that Saul is hurting. And that resonates with Saul as it would with any of us. In that Heineken commercial I like that part where the two strangers must watch their videos together; they've stated their political views and ideologies, and you can see the pain on their faces as they hear themselves say things that might have hurt the person standing next to them. And instead of identifying themselves as "political" beings, they understand that they are PERSONS first and foremost. They are sensitive to the pain that their words and actions can inflict on other PERSONS. Jesus identifies himself as a person who is persecuted, because others are persecuted. And Saul must now face himself for the harm that he has done to the PERSON Jesus.

Then Jesus disarms Saul by blinding him. Saul has a lot to deal with here, physically and mentally. He has done great harm to many innocent people, and he has lost his sight. He is broken in every sense of the world. And I mentioned that a few weeks ago, that the first step we must take toward spiritual healing and wholeness is RECOGNIZING OUR OWN BROKENNESS. If you read Paul's letters found in the New Testament you would recognize how broken he must have been: To his protégé Timothy Saul writes, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost." (1 Timothy 1:15). We remember Saul as Paul, the Saint who worked tirelessly for years to bring the good news of Jesus' resurrection and lordship to the gentiles, but Paul never lets his accomplishments go to his head; he is still the worst of all sinners. This is a man who was driven to please God by strictly following his laws, who felt that was doing the right thing by snuffing the Christian movement, but now he is humble and blind, hardly a threat to anyone.

And now Jesus goes to Ananias and instructs him to pay a visit to the enemy. And you have to admire Jesus' sense of humor: Ananias knew who Saul was – as we'd say, *his reputation preceded him*. He would have been known as "SAUL OF TARSUS." But Jesus says to Ananias, "Go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He's there praying." You can just sense what Ananias is thinking, because the next thing we learn is that he makes a

formal complaint: “You can’t be serious!” “THAT guy? No way! We know what he’s done and what he plans to do. Forget it.”

Have you met the Christian who is unwilling to cross religious lines? Every religion has the sort who demonizes everyone whose faith is different from their own. Some kill because of it; some despise those whose belief differs from their own. Some convince themselves that those who believe differently are bound for hell. But very few would actually pay a visit to someone who is known to hold beliefs that so directly conflict to their own beliefs. Yet this is what Jesus requires of Ananias: “Don’t argue: Go! I’ve picked this guy for a very special mission.”

I defined “wholeness” as being in complete harmony with God and others, ALL others. In our journey toward wholeness, God has a way of removing obstacles that divide us so that we can see the goodness within us that unites us. Sometimes God forces us into situations where we must confront the differences that polarize us, differences that cause so much pain and suffering in this world. Sometimes he brings “enemies” close together in order that we can realize a common goodness. That’s my prayer for you today. May God help each of us come closer to one another despite whatever differences we have. May God give us patience to sit down – over a beer or a cup of tea – and speak to one another, to discover in one another the beauty that God sees in all of us. And may the world that Casey Marie grows into be a world of less division, less strife, and more empathy.