

Knocked off Our High Horse

Text: Acts 1-19

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on October 11, 2020

The story about Paul's dramatic conversion in Acts 9 begins by telling us that Saul was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." This doesn't mean he was uttering them under his breath like an anonymous Twitter troll. Back in Acts 7 we were told about Stephen, the first follower of Jesus to be martyred for his belief in Jesus. He was dragged out of the city of Jerusalem and stoned to death by an angry mob, overseen by a young man--Saul.

The first paragraph of Acts 8 tells us that the stoning of Stephen set off a severe persecution of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem and then specifically tells us in Acts 8:3: "But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." Saul doesn't just make threats; he carries them out.

Saul, or Paul which was his Greek name, was a Pharisee—an expert in Jewish law—in the faction of Judaism that held political power in first century Jerusalem, at least to the extent that Roman occupation allowed. As such, he was trying to obliterate one of many new factions of Judaism in that period. That new faction was called "The Way," which was comprised of Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah. So, public service announcement here, this is not Jews killing Christians. It is Jews killing other Jews with whom they disagreed. Mistaking that is one of the ways antisemitism creeps into Christianity. There are no Christians, as we know them today, in this story.

By chapter 9 we've learned that Saul's murderous actions did not stop. In fact, he's now expanded his persecution campaign beyond Jerusalem and even beyond the Roman province of Palestine. Now he's got permission from the high priest to start rounding up any followers of Jesus in Damascus, 136 miles away in Syria, to bring them back to Jerusalem for imprisonment or worse. It's right before he enters Damascus that we get the dramatic story of a blinding light that knocks Saul to the ground and a voice claiming to be Jesus say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" This encounter leaves Saul literally blind and he has to be led into Damascus by others.

If you're a student of the fine arts, you believe he was knocked off a horse, since a famous painting by Caravaggio depicts the scene that way. The Bible just tells us he was knocked to the ground. But whether or not there was a literal horse, this moment knocks the murderous Saul off of his high horse of religious arrogance. About three years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus meets Saul with a body blow to provide the humility that Saul's lifetime of Scriptural study had failed to instill in him. You can almost hear Jesus say, "What part of 'walk humbly with your God' in Micah 6:8 wasn't clear to you, Saul? You call yourself a Pharisee? An expert in the law? You seek to lead my people in the ways of God and you missed that part? What part of 'love your neighbor as yourself' in Leviticus 19:18 allows you to kill people in my name?"

And while that was a tough-love moment and hard on Saul, the job that is much, much harder falls to a follower of Jesus in Damascus. His name is Ananias. There are a couple other people with that name in the Bible. One is killed off for lying several chapters before and another we encounter later as a high priest. But this one is only mentioned here and again later in Acts when Paul tells about this experience. He's not a leader; he's not famous. He's just a regular old member of The Way, trying to live out the teachings of Jesus. In other words, Ananias is exactly the kind of faithful saint that Saul was coming to arrest.

Jesus also appears to him in a vision. Ananias doesn't need to be knocked down, because he'd grown enough spiritually to not put himself up in the first place. Still, he gets the hardest job of all. Take a minute to feel what Ananias must have felt when Jesus tells him to go find Saul and restore his sight. We can hear some of it in how he first responds. "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."

Hear what Jesus is asking of this devoted follower. Imagine an asylum seeker being told to go find the head of an ICE detention facility and heal him. Ananias has no earthly reason to expect that he's going to come back from this mission. Ananias knows who Saul is. His reputation for ruthless persecution precedes him, even in this neighboring province. And yet, he goes and does what Jesus has asked. He walks directly into the lion's den and heals the lion. Was Ananias secretly pleased that Jesus told him that Saul was going to have to suffer? Maybe. I would have been. But "Love your enemies" doesn't have to do with how we **feel** about our enemies. Love is an action verb. It's about taking action to help someone in distress, regardless of how we feel about them, whether they had it coming to them, what they have done, and all the rest.

When Paul later recounts this moment in Acts 22, he says that Ananias was a devout man and well spoken of by all the Jews living there." That must have been true and more, because this task would not and could not be given to someone who was spiritually immature. This is not just "Love your neighbor" level work. This is "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" level work. Literally.

Here's what Jesus has to say about the matter in Luke 6:27-31: "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." We throw around that last part—the Golden Rule—like it's easy. Ask Ananias if what he did was easy.

I suspect he was frightened as he found his way to the street called Straight and asked for the infamous Saul of Tarsus. He might even have been angry that God wanted to heal this horrible man and use him to preach to kings. I mean, weren't there any saints available without blood on their hands? Why not use one of the Apostles? Why on earth would you help out Saul of Tarsus, God?? But whatever Ananias thought did not affect his actions. He went, entered the house, laid his hands on Saul and prayed for Saul to receive both his sight and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Saul's sight was restored, he was baptized, and regained his strength and the Bible does not mention Ananias again.

A point to note here is that Saul did not jump up from his baptism and write 1 Corinthians 13. From the time of Saul's conversion to his first missionary journey is about twelve years and about twenty years before he wrote that famous chapter on love. In terms of preparation for ministry, that's about right. Saul's dramatic encounter and vision changed his mind about Jesus immediately. He was baptized the minute he regained his sight. But spiritual growth doesn't happen overnight, and Saul's spiritual arrogance was hard-baked into his character and would take time, trials, and suffering to break it open enough for him to grow.

God had to knock him to the ground and blind him for three days to get him even to consider that he might be wrong. No matter how well he knew the Scriptures, no matter how frequently he attended synagogue or sacrificed at the Temple, Saul had to grow spiritually before he would be fit for ministry. And that takes time. Saul had much to unlearn about the nature of God and faith before the man who thought he could save the faith by executing others could bear living witness to the One who would allow himself to be executed in order to save the world. In Saul's case that growth process took twelve years, and he still had some pretty rough edges even then.

Ananias and Saul were both known to the community before this event. Saul was known for his zealous cruelty. In recalling the event later, Paul notes that Ananias was known in Damascus for his devotion and service. Saul had to be body-slammed and blinded to get him on the right path. Ananias simply received gentle instruction on the hardest task God can ask of any of us: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." And without fanfare, he did it. Paul established the church across Asia Minor. By opening himself to the work of the Holy Spirit and risking his life, Ananias established Paul and showed him what Paul would later call, "The more excellent way." Who, I ask you, was the greater man?

The core of Christian faith—the thing that defines spiritual maturity—is the example of Jesus at the center of the Gospel. If our love for others is strong enough to risk our own lives so that their lives can be better, that kind of love will save the world. Ananias knew that truth when he got up to help the man who was sent to Damascus to arrest him. Paul learned that truth across the roughly 32 years of shipwrecks, beatings, and imprisonment that followed his conversion.

When Paul writes "Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude," he knows of what he speaks because he used to be all of those things. When he wrote that love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things," he first saw that truth in action when an enemy he came to arrest—Ananias—risked his life to restore Paul's sight. Paul knew in that moment that he was lacking, but it took a holy smackdown and a humble man of love to get him there.

We shouldn't expect to start our spiritual growth with the ability to love our enemies or with the courage of Ananias. That comes only with the grown tree planted by streams of water. But when we look at our world today and wonder how we ever get out of the unholy mess of hate and division that is literally killing us; Ananias shows us what it will take to cure our blindness. It doesn't take great leaders or famous people. It takes people capable of great love, which can be any of us if we're willing.

However small we start, the love and courage of Ananias should be our goal, and we really shouldn't need to be knocked to the ground to recognize it—not if we have read about the life of Jesus and heard his teaching. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same...But love your enemies, do good...Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

It is that mercy, that amazing grace, that saves us. It is extending that mercy, that grace, that love to absolutely everyone, enemies included, that saves us all. The only question is whether we will be mature enough to recognize the call when it comes or whether God will have to knock us off of our high horse and make us blind before we will finally be able to truly see. Amen.