

Welcoming the Stranger
Acts 9:23-36
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National Presbyterian Church
March 18, 2018

Every Sunday at the conclusion to the Pastoral Prayer we join together in unison, praying for God's Kingdom to come. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth... as it is in heaven." Last week we heard our First graders pray The Lord's Prayer right in front of this pulpit. Some of us pray this prayer every day. I wonder... when we pray for God's kingdom to come, what are we hoping for? What are we asking God to do? What are we praying for, when we pray for God's kingdom to come on earth? **Let us pray.**

Introduction

Last week Dr. Renwick spoke about the first part of Acts chapter 9—the story of how the Pharisee Saul became the Apostle Paul. He was on the road to Damascus, intent on hunting down disciples of Jesus—this is how the author Luke describes Jesus' followers in the Book of Acts—disciples. Saul was after disciples of Jesus... so he could persecute, even kill them. ***When all of a sudden Jesus himself*** appeared in a blinding flash of light. After Saul regained his sight he was a different person. No longer the arch-enemy of the Christian movement "breathing threats and murder." Paul would become the outspoken proclaimer-in-chief of the Gospel. Most of the remaining chapters in the Book of Acts that we will be looking at in our sermons in the coming weeks recount Paul's journeys as the first Christian missionary. They provide amazing evidence of Paul's transformative encounter with the risen Christ. Along with Peter, Paul came to be known as chief among the apostles. It is a remarkable conversion story. The word "conversion" literally means an "altogether turn." A complete change of direction. That's what happens in an encounter with the risen Jesus Christ. And that's what we see in the life of Saul, whose Greek name is Paul. A true conversion.

I

Conversion is the first evidence we see in our lives that God's Kingdom has come on earth. When John the Baptist told people to get ready for Jesus because the Kingdom of God was very close, he called for repentance. This is the first step in conversion. Turn from old ways and prepare for an encounter with Jesus Christ that will bring you to new ways. Paul's experience was very compressed. He was struck blind by the glory of God. When he recovered his sight a few days later, he saw everything anew... he was a different person because of his experience of the risen Jesus Christ. The resurrection was the *sine qua non* of Christian faith for Paul. The resurrection is proof that what Jesus said was true: That he really is the Messiah, and that the Kingdom of God really has begun to come on earth. Without the resurrection, there is no Christianity. He wrote in I Corinthians 15 that if Jesus did not rise from the dead we believe and hope in nothing.

Last week David discussed how, for some, conversion happens all-of-a-sudden. For others it happens more gradually over time. How conversion happens may vary, but the evidence is always a life that is re-oriented, turning away from the ways of the world, toward the Kingdom of God. We see this in Paul's new life right away, even before he leaves Damascus. Here's how Luke tells it, in the passage just before this morning's reading:

For several days Saul was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked Jesus's name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound

before the chief priests?”²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

II

Paul’s **con**version leads to **a**version. Paul’s transformed life stuns those who had known him before. They can’t believe it. He goes to the Jewish synagogues in Damascus with a very different message than before his conversion. He proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God, proving that he is the messiah. This change in Paul’s life evoked hatred and suspicion. The Jews of Damascus are **averse** to this new person and want to kill him. So he flees to Jerusalem. When he gets there, Jesus’ followers—the disciples—also can’t believe it. Not one of them. They have nothing but suspicion. They are averse to the old Paul—who they remember as Saul. They can’t believe he is any different... that he has changed. To a person, the text says: they were **all** afraid of him... afraid of the Saul they remembered, Saul the disciple-killer.

Fear is the great opponent of faith. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is fear. Fear prevents the disciples from believing that the Saul before them now could be the different person he claims to be. But if God can raise Jesus from the dead, he can transform a disciple-hunter into one of the chief apostles.

One wonders how Paul felt about this. He could have expected that his former associates would shun him. But it must have been pretty difficult to find that the disciples in Jerusalem won’t accept him either. He’s undergone this remarkable transformation and his life has been totally rearranged by the risen Christ and his fellow-believers reject him. Sometimes the greatest pain we experience is not from our enemies, but from our fellow-believers, those we expect to be our friends.

III

Except for Barnabas. He was different. We read how Barnabas took Paul to the apostles. This is a different group than the disciples who were all suspicious of Paul. The apostles are the original followers of Jesus, initially called by Jesus to be his disciples and then sent as apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. If you look at the text closely you’ll see that there are two different verbs that describe what happened. It says that Barnabas took Paul—perhaps literally he took Paul under his wing—in any case he went with Paul and brought him to the leadership of the Jerusalem church—the Apostles. And Barnabas’s friendship apparently gives Paul enough credibility so that he is embraced... meaning that they forgave him for his former antipathy toward Jesus’ followers. Luke does not supply details of what this reconciliation looked like, but we see clear evidence near the end of our passage when concern is shown for Paul’s safety as, once again, people are trying to kill him. It is instructive to read how Luke describes the scene. A group of Jesus’ followers learn of Paul’s danger and bring him to the coast where he can get on a boat for a safe place. Luke describes them as “brothers.” The former enemy is now their brother in Christ—a term Paul will go on to use over and over again in his letters to all the churches he starts.

IV

This points to what is perhaps the primary characteristic of the Kingdom of God coming on earth. First there is a **con**version. Often this is followed by an **a**version. But then there must be an **in**version... an upending of belief and values that results in concrete and remarkable behavioral change. This is the mark of a changed life. Led by Barnabas, the Jerusalem church embraces their former persecutor as a brother in Christ. Which is what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the

Mount. If you look on the cover of your bulletin you'll find a particularly relevant passage. Because even more than Paul was a *stranger* to the early church, he was their *enemy*. And Jesus takes the command to love our neighbor and puts such a sharp point on it. I don't really like that Jesus says this because it is hard. Not just our neighbor, Jesus says. His followers are to love enemies. And if that isn't enough, we are to pray for those who persecute us. He didn't say we had to like them!

The church is called to love our neighbors, and to welcome strangers who are not like us, and even to love our enemies. Because that is what God does. Paul learned this through his conversion, and in his experiences with fellow Christians in Damascus and Jerusalem. In Romans 5 he would write that Christ died for us while we were still sinners... and *enemies* of God. In Ephesians he would speak of Christ breaking down the wall that divides Jew and Gentile, that they are no longer *strangers* to God and to each other because of Jesus' reconciling act. We love our enemies because we are loved by an enemy-loving God. This was the kind of love that Barnabas had for Paul, it was the love the Apostles developed for him. It is the love that Jesus had for sinners and tax-collectors, for prostitutes and society's outcasts. This is the kind of love that we are called to embody as the church—this same unexpected love... a love for enemies we fear and strangers not like us.

V

Is there any evidence of this kind of enemy loving and stranger welcoming in the American church today? The Barna Group conducted a poll to learn what people—especially young people between the ages of 16 and 29—what they think of the church. The sample group included young people both inside and outside the church. The results are not encouraging. The poll is a few years old now, but at the time only 16% of non-Christians in their late teens and 20's had a "good impression" of Christianity. It was much worse for "evangelical Christianity", with only 3% having a favorable view. At the same time, 91% of American evangelicals said they thought that Americans are becoming more hostile and negative toward Christianity. Of course anyone who pays attention to the news is aware that this is only one of many points of division in our increasingly tribal contemporary culture. It is worth noting some of the specifics. According to the survey, the three words most frequently used to describe the church are: *homophobic*, *judgmental*, and *hypocritical*.

I happen to disagree. I don't doubt the results of the poll or the methods, but I think that these perceptions are incorrect, and even unfair. But that's beside the point. Because I understand how these opinions have been formed. And I note that Jesus did not tell his followers that we are to argue with, or correct the misunderstandings of strangers or enemies. He calls us to love them and to welcome them.

We are called in our life together as Jesus' followers to be transformed by this enemy-loving, stranger-welcoming God. That is the only way that those outside the church will change their perception that we look like enemy-haters, and even enemy-makers. The world wants to see a transformative gospel. If we will embody this unexpected love of God in Jesus Christ, the way that Barnabas did in his embrace of Paul, and the way that Paul did so passionately in his life and ministry and letters after his conversion, we will find ourselves in the Kingdom of God coming on earth as we learn to love enemies and welcome strangers because we are loved by the stranger-welcoming, enemy-loving God. And that will be a credible witness to a watching, increasingly skeptical world. Not a perfect witness, just a credible witness.

Conclusion

Doris was a member of a church in Northern California when my friend was her pastor. Well into her 80's, she was Tall and elegant, with carefully styled hair that she usually had done every Friday morning. One Sunday she did not make it to church, and soon there were many rumors. My concerned-friend made a pastoral visit to her after worship. Doris' first words were, "Let me tell you a story." She had arrived at church and was reaching over to get the banana muffins she baked. "You know my banana muffins. I always bake them. Well, I reached over for them, and someone knocked me on the head and pushed me over the console and got in the driver's seat. The next thing she knew he was driving off with her car... Doris beside him.

She turned to the person driving and said "*who are you?*" Isn't that remarkable? I have never been mugged and kidnapped, but somehow I don't think I'd start by asking my attacker's name? She told him her name was Doris, and he said he was Jesse.

She asked where they were going, and he said that they were going to her ATM machine to get money. He was a drug addict, and he knew that was not a good thing, but he had to get money. After intimidating her for her password at their first stop, while they were speeding away to a second, Doris told him "you need to get out of this life." At the third stop her daily withdrawal limit had been reached and Jesse was about to leave Doris on the side of the road. Doris told him: "*I will pray you get caught. You need Jesus and a good rehab program so that you have the strength to get off drugs and have a better life. I will pray you get that.*" I'm sure I would have said something just like that were it me facing a kidnapper.

But Jesse changed his mind and helped Doris out of the car and around to the driver's seat, buckled her seat belt and kissed her on the neck instead.

Within a couple of months Doris was at the police station identifying Jesse in the lineup. Soon after that she sat in the witness box at the courthouse, where she waved and said hello to Jesse, reminding him that she had prayed for this moment. She answered the questions about the crime and then turned to the judge and said: "I told Jesse that he needs a good rehab program so he can get his life back. I want you to convict him because he's guilty, but he also really needs help, please, Judge." "Love your enemies," Jesus said. "Pray for those who persecute you."

Doris loved her enemy. Without hesitancy, following Jesse through his two years in prison, loving him. My pastor friend said, "If I wore a bracelet, it would not say 'What Would Jesus Do?' but 'What Would Doris Do?'" She knows what it means live in the Kingdom of God."

Our passage ends this way:

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

The measure of the health of a church is, in the end, whether the people in it are following Jesus and living as part of the Kingdom he is bringing on earth. The Kingdom we pray will come on earth, as it is in heaven. **Let us pray...**