

When an Enemy Becomes a Brother

Acts 9:1-21

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

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Since late November we've been looking at the Gospel of Luke. Today we begin to watch the sequel. We are moving on to the Book of Acts. While Luke tells a story of the life of Jesus, Acts tells stories of the disciples of Jesus as they become empowered by the Holy Spirit and start the church.

Today's story is about Saul who later in Acts changes his name to Paul. Paul is the name he is most known by, so in my sermon I'm going to use the name Paul. Please don't be confused, as Paul and Saul are the same person.

We read in the first verse that Saul is "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." A little background. Saul was present at the stoning to death of Stephen, one of the first deacons of the church. Saul then becomes zealous for exterminating the followers of Jesus, whom he views as Jewish heretics.

A further note: We must remind ourselves that at this point the Jesus movement was still a version of Judaism, and not a separate religion.

Let us now hear the story from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles:

[Read Acts 9:1-22]

The Conversion of St. Paul is the traditional name of this story. The Damascus Road Experience is another. The story is supposed to be the paradigm example of conversion—of a sinner being overwhelmed by the grace of God and repenting. That's how this story was preached in the Baptist world I grew up in.

However, recent scholarship on Paul is cautious in calling this story a conversion. For example, Krister Stendahl, who was the Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, Sweden, wrote in his book *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*:

Here is not that change of 'religion' that we commonly associate with the word conversion. Serving one and the same God, Paul receives a new and special calling—in God's service. God's Messiah asks him as a Jew to bring God's message to the Gentiles. . . . Rather than being "converted," Paul was called to a specific task. . . . It is a call to mission rather than a conversion.

Getting our terms right has important implications for our interfaith relationships with our Jewish sisters and brothers. Christian history has been stained by anti-Semitism, despite the clear historical facts that Jesus and all of his earliest followers were Jews who did not consider themselves to be founding a separate religion.

So, Paul is not converted in the sense of changing religions. Nor in the evangelical sense of a sinner repenting and finding religion. Yet something radical changes in how Paul understands and practices his faith. What was it? What changed?

Before his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul combined religious zealotry with a belief that violence could be used to further the faith. Scholar Michael Gorman writes, "Paul had precedent . . . Israel had a history of holy heroes whose zeal for God motivated their taking violent action against Israel's enemies."

Think of all those great stories you may have learned in Sunday school. David defeating the giant Goliath using a slingshot. Joshua at the Battle of Jericho where the walls of the city came tumbling down. Samson collapsing the building in which he was chained killing himself and the Philistines partying around him. Growing up I didn't need to watch violent movies—the Bible stories were violent enough.

The story that Michael Gorman highlights in his book *Reading Paul* is a story about the priest Phinehas. Now, Phinehas is not one of those Old Testament characters we usually learn about in Sunday school. Phinehas was the grandson of Aaron, the original High Priest. In the Book of Numbers, chapter 25, Phinehas, with a zealous desire to stamp out impurity and immorality, kills an Israelite man and his non-Israelite consort. According to the story, his action receives divine approval and is counted as righteous. Psalm 106 was later written to celebrate Phinehas and his deeds.

Last Sunday Bernie Monbuquette began chatting with me as I was walking back to my office to disrobe, and we began to talk about some of the dangerous implications of statements and stories in the Bible, particularly those that condone slavery and patriarchy. Here in the Phinehas story is another example of a terrifying biblical text. The Phinehas story provides biblical support for a violent religious fundamentalism.

Maybe a young Paul was drawn to stories like this. Maybe the story of Phinehas fired his imagination and zeal.

And then.

Paul is struck to the ground by a bright light and a voice "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And it seems that Paul had never before considered the possibility that those whom he persecuted might also be the beloved children of God.

I was pleased with much of the news this week of Pope Francis' new teaching document for the Roman Catholic Church on sexual and family issues. One nugget I was drawn to was his insistence that those who violate Roman Catholic teaching may still be in a state of grace and should be treated as such.

Struck blind on the Damascus Road, Paul is then cared for by Ananias, finding healing from the very people whom he would have murdered. The entire experience forever alters how Paul practices his faith.

Violence is rejected for peace-making. Inflicting suffering on others is replaced by accepting suffering on behalf of others. Purity is overwhelmed by grace. And exclusion is set aside for a broad and inclusive vision of the family of God. Paul will spend the rest of his life on a zealous mission to build the church of Jesus Christ as a broad and inclusive family that treats

Jews and non-Jews the same.

Needless to say, this rejection of religious fundamentalism is not how the story was preached to me when I was growing up.

But most of us already practice a non-violent, inclusive faith. We can pride ourselves on our liberality and our enlightenment.

Last week I parked my car behind a vehicle bearing a bumper sticker for a candidate I dislike. I began to fantasize how I might express my dislike if I ran into the driver of the car. I imagined surprising them by saying "You must be a loathsome person."

Being right is fun.

Yet as I fantasized being a jerk, my conscience read back to me the words of my own recent column in the church newsletter, where I wrote about the life of reason and our democratic responsibility to listen to and understand one another. A good person, of course, wouldn't confront the owner of the car with the bumpersticker. A good person, of course, would make the effort to understand them.

Being good is far more difficult work than being right.

I'm glad God won't let me be a jerk, even if I might take some momentary pleasure in it.

Our worship theme for the Easter season is "The Great Reversal." The Greatest Reversal is, of course, the resurrection. We proclaim that life defeats death.

On a personal level, God wants to change us. And my guess is that even those of us who are kind and fair, those who consider ourselves liberal and enlightened still have some group of people we find it difficult to see as beloved children of God. Good Ananias was frightened by God's call to go and visit the murderous Paul, yet Ananias was courageous and caring and opened the door for an enemy to become a brother.

Jesus teaches us to love our enemies. These words remain among the most challenging that he offers. It is difficult enough to keep loving our siblings and our parents and our spouses. But enemies!

This story from Acts is about how a murderous enemy becomes a brother. About how broad and inclusive the grace of God is. So, let's be sure that we aren't so determined to be right that we forget what it means to be good.

Lord, make us instruments of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.