

Confronted and Transformed

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Scripture Reading: Acts 9:1-12, 17-20

1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **2** 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. **3** Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4** He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” **5** He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. **6** But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” **7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. **8** 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. **9** For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. **10** Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” **11** 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, **12** 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.”

17 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.” **18** And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, **19** and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, **20** and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

It is incredibly difficult to change the mind of someone who is said to be dead set or even hell bent on something. I use these harsh terms in light of what we have just read from the book of Acts and Saul, who is later known as the apostle Paul, is so filled with such vicious threats and murderous desires.

Recently I was reading the news and heard of those being tried for the plot to kidnap and murder Governor Whitmer. Of the 14 charged, 3 have additional charges of having the plans and means of using weapons of mass destruction. They were planning on blowing up a bridge to slow down the police from being able to respond.

I pause here to say, as I have in the past when bringing up and addressing racial violence with senseless deaths of our Black and Brown brothers and sisters, the riot and storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6 that left several dead, including a Capitol Police officer, and other acts of violence, which includes the planning of kidnapping and killing government officials, that it is not about taking sides. It's about protecting and saving lives.

Throughout history, there were so many powerless people being mistreated, abused, and killed for what others thought were good reasons. Usually it comes down to fear. Fear of differences, fear of losing something, and fear of having lost something and not only blaming but wanting to make others pay, even with their lives. Fear turns into anger that should fuel dialogue, constructive debate and planning, and even the peaceful decision to agree to disagree.

We have witnessed this happening, and it continues to happen today. People are afraid of each other, and after a while some seem not to care anymore, on all sides. And when it comes to acts of violence, especially needless ones by those we trust, including the police, speaking up about the need for that to change is not an opposition or hatred of the police, as some would say and try to pit people against the other. But unfortunately, that happens. We know there is crime and that police officers put themselves in harms way daily, which is part of their job which we know is not only one of high responsibility but also high risk. We know this world has many dangerous aspects to it, not only physical violence but also acts of violence in the forms of social, economic, gender, racial and other forms of inequality and injustices.

So simply put, just because one speaks out against such injustice does not mean they hate or are against “the other.” That does not mean there isn’t hatred or the seeking of eliminating who they see as their opponent or enemy. We’ve seen the wrongful acts and plots in the past and more recently.

Again, it not only breaks my heart, but it makes me and many wonder what can be done about it. And to talk more about this is about bringing us together when the world is trying to tear us apart and have us fighting each other rather than the real issues and rather than helping and loving one another.

In the case of Saul who was on a rampage to persecute, arrest, imprison, and even have killed all who followed the Way, that is Jesus Christ, it seems easy for us today to say in agreement that was wrong and needed to be confronted and changed.

However, when you look back at how Saul got so much power and support from the high priests to carry out his acts of terror and murder, you see the body of people who had the authority to issue such power to Saul and all who’d go after all of Jesus’ followers, then you discover that it was not only unfair but something pretty much no one could do anything about. The high priests were supposed to be those who acted in the name of God, who were to care for every person, not only those they thought were deserving.

It’s one thing when those who have authority and power want to do what is best for everyone, even though it’s not only difficult for many and not seemingly best for everyone who is trying to help everyone else ends up losing in various ways. It’s a totally different thing when those with power and authority are literally sentencing people to death. And many times, those who are being hunted down, captured, arrested, imprisoned and killed have no power, authority, or ability to fight back.

So it was with the first Christians, the first followers of Jesus Christ.

Look at times when people did not speak up and fight for change throughout history of genocide, slavery of the Israelites by the Egyptians, the slavery of African Americans throughout the world, including the U.S.A., the encampment of children of refugees separated from their parents, the holocaust where 6 million Jews were mercilessly slaughtered, and the list

goes on. Thankful God used people and nations to step up in many of these situations at various times or what was already terribly insufferable would have been even more terribly horrible.

God does intervene. In the case with Saul, Jesus intervened himself. If he hadn't, not only would many of his followers died, but the gospel itself may have not been spread and reached so many, including us today.

Since those early church days of Saul, there has been persecution of Christians. At the same time there have been those who spoke up, confronted those persecuting Christians, and who have helped change what was going on. Of course, the nature of evil and spiritual warfare has us in a constant battle that we must choose to fight the good fight for the love of our Lord and Savior and the love of one another.

Jesus confronts Saul by using powerful light that knocks Saul to his knees. Speaks to Saul, though Jesus does not appear before them. He instructs Saul to go to Damascus and wait there. This confrontation is part of Saul's transformation and conversion. Saul was truly blind spiritually. He now was blind literally and in need of others to guide him.

Interesting that we learn that those following Jesus were known as followers of the Way. Also interesting that the house Saul stayed at was on a street named Straight. And for the transformation of Saul, God sent the disciple Ananias to go to Saul and teach him, lay hands on him, and baptize him. Saul regained his sight and received the Holy Spirit.

One portion of Scripture we did not read was the portion in between the first and second parts we read today. In that portion of Scripture we find Ananias being shocked that God would tell him to walk right into the presence and hands of the very man trying to capture and kill disciples of Christ like him. Here is the conversation Ananias had with the Lord in a vision, from verses 13-16:

13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; **14** and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." **15** 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; **16** I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Something God does repeatedly throughout history is call his followers to be part of his work in confronting and transforming people. And though not all people are transformed, there are times when many lives were not only spared but also saved in the name of Jesus Christ.

Remember that we do the work of planting, watering, and nurturing, but it is God who created the seed, who makes it grow, if the seed desires it. God does give us humans such freedom. And of course, on some occasions, such as in Saul's case, confronts and transforms with a holy presence and force that it cannot be easily resisted.

Let us remember that when we are faced with not only seemingly insurmountable mountains and issues in life, but also seemingly impossible and unchangeable people and groups of people who seek to harm rather than help, who want to hurt rather than heal, and who rather have death than life.

We are followers of Jesus Christ who is the Way, Truth and Life. And as early disciples found out, that though it makes for truly joyful, loving, hope-filled life with the promise of eternal life, does not necessarily make for an easier life.

Pray that God will work in you to confront and transform anything that God needs to change. Pray that God will work through you to be part of his working, as in Ananias' life, in the confrontation and transformation of others for the name and sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

This Week's Praises and Prayer Requests:

PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING

1. Youth Group with Jamie's leadership did their service project last year working on and beautifying the church with taking care of weeds, cleaning windows, and other spring projects. Special word of thanks to Jamie for all the years she has led the youth group with the help Jen Luciow.
2. Kim Baxter's mom, Mary, who had stopped chemo cancer treatments and did not do any radiation was examined and was found to be with no cancer. She is miraculously declared cancer-free by her very surprised and thankful doctors. Kim and her family thank everyone for their prayers.

PRAYER REQUEST

1. Continued prayers for Theresa Miller who after a fall accident and seemed to okay has started to experience significant pain which they are examining.
2. Continued prayers for Chuck Giglio, father of the friends of Elaine Gasidlo's daughter, Carrie and her husband. Chuck suffered major injuries after a motorcycle accident.