

Sermon: "From Enemy to Evangelist"  
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Acts 9:1 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.

Acts 9:10 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." 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." 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."

A SAINT?

This week Father Emil Kapaun, a chaplain during the Korean War was recognized for his bravery on the battlefield and in a prisoner of war camp.

During battles, Kapaun would run into enemy fire to save wounded Americans or comfort the dying. When he was captured and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp, he defied the guards in order to care for other soldiers, physically and spiritually, until he died in 1951.

For sixty years fellow soldiers had petitioned that he be given the Medal of Honor. Finally, this week it happened. At the ceremony Obama said, "Father Kapaun has been called a shepherd in combat boots. His fellow soldiers, who felt his grace and his mercy, called him a saint — a blessing from God. ... I can't imagine a better example for all of us."

According to a fellow soldier one of the last things Father Kapaun did was to forgive his captors for their treatment of him. Obviously, this was a man who deserves special recognition for his courage. He is indeed a great example.

And yet his example seems too hard for most of us to achieve. Most of us want to save our lives instead of losing them. And how could he forgive those who persecuted him even as he died?

Jesus did say that we are to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us, and some may be brave enough to do that. But, let's be honest. Most of us are not that brave.

I've heard that Father Kapaun is being considered for sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church. Maybe only special super saints can have this kind of courage and love.

But, the Bible doesn't make that distinction.

Jesus said that all who want to follow him are called to take up a cross and follow. Following Jesus is not about making things easier. Following Jesus is about losing our life for the sake of the gospel.

The call to courage and loving our enemies is not just for the super saint and Medal of Honor winners. That is Christ's call to all of us.

How can we do this? How can show such courage and faith? I think the example of Ananias; the other conversion story in our lesson for today gives us a clue.

## PERSECUTOR IN CHIEF

But, first let's consider Paul.

Paul was an enemy of the early church. Our Scripture tells us that he was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. And these were no idle threats.

We learn about Paul earlier in the book of Acts. Paul watched and approved as Stephen was stoned to death for preaching the gospel. Stephen, imitating the death of Jesus did forgive his tormentors as they killed him. But, Paul was not impressed.

In fact the stoning of Stephen inspired Paul. In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts we learn that Paul led a severe persecution against the church in Jerusalem. And all the followers of Jesus were scattered throughout the countryside.

But, this did not satisfy Paul. He continued to ravage the church. He went door-to-door, arresting men and women who followed Jesus. And then he “committed them to prison.”

In other words he put them in jail and threw away the key.

Apparently Paul had succeeded in eliminating most Christians in Jerusalem so he decided to expand his persecution. In our lesson for today he turns his attention toward Damascus.

He goes to the high priest, asks him for letters of introduction to the synagogues at Damascus. Upon the authority of the high priest he will go and interrogate the members of those synagogues. If any of them follow the way of Jesus (man or woman) he will bind them and drag them back to Jerusalem to stand trial.

In order for Paul to change, something radical had to happen in his life. Paul was one of those people who may have been wrong from time to time, but he was never in doubt. Paul was sure that he knew what was good and right and true, especially when it came to God and God’s will.

You can get a glimpse into the mindset of Paul before his conversion from something he wrote in his letter to the Philippians. Paul said of himself,

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Philippians 3:4-6)

In other words, Paul thought he had it all. He had the proper family background, religious training and moral principles. And he was willing to do whatever was necessary to make sure his particular view of God and the world prevailed.

## CHOSEN BY JESUS

But, a funny thing happened on the road to Damascus. Paul ran into the presence of God as revealed in Jesus. Jesus asks Paul, "Why are persecuting me?" And Paul has no answer. He only asks, "Who are you Lord?"

The reply came, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Then Jesus gives Paul new marching orders. He tells Paul, "Get up. Enter the city, and you will be told what to do next."

Note that the change in Paul was not the result of personal contemplation or a choice that he made. Paul thought that he was right. No argument could change his mind.

So God changed his mind. God choose to pull back the curtain and reveal to Paul what was really happening. In an instant Paul's world was completely changed.

God has a habit of choosing the most unlikely people to do His will. Paul joins a long list of thieves (like Jacob); murderers (like Moses) and other odd characters that God has chosen to do His will.

Jesus once told his disciples, "You didn't choose me. I chose you." (John 15:1-6) The same was true in the selection of Paul. Paul didn't choose God. God choose Paul.

Perhaps the best explanation of God's choice is found in something Paul himself wrote to the Corinthians later in his ministry. The Corinthians thought that they were special because God had chosen them. Paul responded to their pride by saying, "God often chooses the foolish and the weak and the poor (like you). In this way no one can boast in the presence of God." (See 1 Corinthians 1-2)

God's choice changes Paul completely. One moment we see a big shot, religious inquisitor ready to put heretics in jail. Heads will roll when Paul comes to town.

And the next minute a light flashes, Jesus speaks, and this self-confident man is rendered helpless. He opens his eyes, but he cannot see.

The once powerful man who led so many to prison is led like a child to Damascus. And the only way he will ever see again is to receive help from someone he thought was an enemy, a follower of the Way of Jesus by the name of Ananias.

## A LITTLE CHILD

Jesus once taught his disciples about the kingdom. Everyone was paying close attention. Some were even taking notes.

But, there were some children there, and that caused a disruption. Someone pulled someone else's hair. Two were rolling in the dirt. Another was making up a hymnal with a crayon.

Do you remember what Jesus said?

"Let the children come to me. Don't stop them. For it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. You can never enter God's kingdom unless you come as a little child."

And that's how Paul came into God's kingdom.

The blinding light on the road to Damascus changes Paul. He thought that he knew so much about religion. He thought that he had such big, important ideas. But, now he was led by the hand like a little child.

They get a place to stay on Straight Street. But, Paul is overwhelmed by the experience. He doesn't eat. Instead, he prays and ponders what this all might mean.

## ANANIAS' VISION

It's at this point that God chooses to intervene not only in the life of Paul but also in the life of a disciple named Ananias. In a vision the Lord tells Ananias to get up, go to Straight Street, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. He's lost his sight and Ananias has been chosen to lay hands on him and give him back his sight.

Notice that even though this vision comes from the Lord, Ananias is not so eager to obey. He answers the Lord's call with an objection,

"Lord, are you sure? I've heard that this guy is a really bad man. He's hurt a lot of people in Jerusalem and he's come here to arrest those of us who trust in you."

The Lord does not disagree with Ananias' evaluation. Paul was indeed a great enemy of the early church.

But, God has plans for Paul. He tells Ananias, "He is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of

Israel.” In other words God has chosen this former enemy to now be God’s evangelist.

And when Paul’s eyes are opened he will see more than the light of day. Paul will see how much he must suffer for the sake of the gospel. Ironically, the persecutor will now become the persecuted.

Before Paul has his eyes opened, Ananias has his eyes opened to the inscrutable ways of God. God chooses an enemy to be an instrument of his grace. The greatest enemy of the church now becomes her greatest evangelist.

## AMAZING GRACE

And this is what allows us to look at our enemies and those who persecute us in a different way. We are not crazy. Enemies and those who persecute us are not good at heart. In many cases nothing that we can do can change their hearts and minds.

But, from time to time God chooses to do what we cannot do. God opens the eyes of enemies and disciples alike to new possibilities. God leads us down a different path.

We don’t trust in our own ability to change or in the ability of our enemies to change. Instead, we trust in the power of God’s amazing grace.

Many of you have heard the story before. When we think of amazing grace we think of the famous hymn. “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but am found, was blind but now I see.”

The guy who wrote those words, John Newton was captain of a slave ship. He spent much of his life contributing to the persecution of innocent people. But, then he met Jesus and this enemy eventually became a friend of those who were in slavery.

By the grace of God his eyes were opened and he could see. The words he penned have been powerfully proclaiming the gospel ever since.

Paul and Ananias both had their eyes opened. Their eyes were opened to the surprising grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Their stories are unique, but their stories are part of a larger story, a story that continues to this day.

And God’s grace is a part of our story as well. We may not see a vision of the risen Christ. We might not be blinded by the glory of God. We might not even be asked to forgive and heal in some heroic and unusual way.

But, we believe that our life is not our own. And from time to time God blinds us. God challenges us and confronts us. God pulls the rug out from under us and causes us to reevaluate who we are and what we believe.

## PEOPLE OF THE WAY

In that regard conversion is not a one-time experience that only happens at the beginning of the Christian journey. Conversion is a process, a journey that lasts our whole life.

In preparation for this sermon, I read a bit more about John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*. When we tell his story we sometimes make it seem like he changed completely all at once.

But, that wasn't the case. Newton became a Christian when he prayed to the Lord for deliverance from a dreadful storm at sea. But, that experience did not change his attitude toward slavery, at least right away. He continued to work a slave ship until a few years later.

Later he did become a minister, and after that he eventually came to oppose the slave trade. God's amazing grace in his life was also gradual grace. It was a process.

Someone suggested that God's amazing grace with Newton was also an example of God's amazing patience. Even the most half-hearted conversions can over time flower into true discipleship.

I believe that every moment of our lives holds the potential for conversion. Every moment of our lives has the possibility that enemies can become friends and half-hearted discipleship can be transformed into courageous faith.

Our lesson for today mentions the first name given those who were disciples of Jesus. They were members of the Jewish sect called "The Way."

That name describes the nature of faith. It reminds us of Abraham and other ancestors in the faith who always on a journey, going to the place that God would show them. In the old days the place of worship for God's people was a tent because God and their faith was always on the move.

I believe those early Christians saw faith in much the same way. They were always on the way. One day they were going down the road to Damascus, and the next day God had them traveling the world proclaiming the gospel. One day they were hiding from their enemies and the next day they were healing their enemies.

We just never know what God is going to do next.

Paul's Damascus road experience was just the beginning of a long journey in a different direction. And we know from the Bible that there would be many stop signs, detours and lane changes for Paul in the years to come.

We are here today because Jesus has called us to be members of His Way. This means that we are on a journey of faith. We can't get too comfortable with our lives. God is still surprising us with gracious encounters that set on a new path. God still leads us in new and unexpected directions.

As the liberal and conservative forces stake out their positions in the church, as we see political and theological battles unfold, I sometimes get the distinct impression that no one is really willing to make a journey to a new place.

Beliefs and ideas seem set in stone. The other side is seen as the enemy or at least sadly mistaken. Out of fear and anger the two sides seem incapable of dialogue. All of us think Scripture is on our side.

No one seems to wonder if maybe God is going to lead us to a new place. We forget that the important thing is not what we want but what God wants.

But, don't despair.

God has a way of making enemies into evangelists. God can make the blind see, and God can make those who think they see blind.

Amazing grace. Amen.