

May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## Acts 9:1-20 “An Unlikely Friendship”

He is risen! (He is risen indeed.) And yes, I do know what week it is in case you're thinking, “Wow, Pastor Jesse was so busy with family visiting, hosting Annual Gathering, and becoming an empty-nester that he forgot Easter was two weeks ago!” Well, according to the lectionary, we are in the season of Eastertide and will continue to be for the next five weeks until Pentecost. That means I get to say, “He is risen” anytime I want during those five weeks. But, as I am often reminded, the church is the body of Christ, and thus we are a people of the resurrection in all times and all places. I might even surprise you with a “He is risen” in August or November! One of the things we often do during Eastertide is turn to the Book of Acts where we learn about how the Holy Spirit worked in and among Jesus' followers to proclaim the gospel to the world. I'm thankful that my friend Charlotte focused on the Great Commission last week to kick off Eastertide, because that event sets the stage for the story of how the church started. If Charlotte had followed the lectionary, she would have preached from an obscure little text in Acts 5 about the apostles being brought before a High Priest. I think she chose the better text because it gives us a clearer introduction for what we'll be covering from now until Pentecost.

This week, we get to see the origin story of one of the most controversial followers of Jesus to have been given the title “Apostle.” Up until Paul, the only way you got the title “Apostle” was to be one of Jesus' disciples who witnessed his earthly ministry first-hand. We know them as “The Twelve,” or “the twelve disciples” or “the twelve apostles.” Here's some trivia for you – Jesus had *way* more than just 12 disciples. Disciple simply means, “follower.” But 12 of those disciples were called, “apostles” which literally means “one who is sent.” That's where last Sunday's lesson came in handy because it's the story of Jesus sending or commissioning eleven of his closest disciples into the world to proclaim the gospel message. “Gospel,” by the way, means “good news.” In the book of Acts, it becomes quite clear that Peter had become the leader of

the Jesus Movement, which was simply called “The Way” in those early days. A good portion of the Book of Acts is all about Peter’s leadership as he traveled through occupied Roman territory proclaiming the Good News. But this week, the Book of Acts introduces us to another person who would eventually hold the title, “Apostle.” Today we’re going to be talking about Saul of Tarsus, also known as Paul the Apostle.

Saul of Tarsus was a shining example of biculturalism. In his letter to the Philippian church, he described himself as, “of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee.” But he was also raised and educated in Roman culture and was familiar with their style of persuasive address and argumentation. Sometimes we say that Jesus was killed because of the unholy alliance between King Herod, and Caesar. And as we know, historically speaking, when corrupt religion gets together with corrupt government, nothing good *ever* comes out of it. Not then, not now. Saul of Tarsus was sort of the love-child of these two ways of life, and to no surprise he was known as a particularly unmerciful “Persecutor of Christians.” And when I say, “Persecutor of Christians” I mean he oversaw the detention, imprisonment and on at least one occasion, the execution of Christians. That’s the kind of persecution I’m talking about. Not, “the Starbucks barista said, ‘happy holidays’ instead of ‘Merry Christmas.’” My guess is that Paul was the type of persecutor who would arrest a Christian for simply having a prayer meeting in public. Perhaps even praying for an assembly of government officials to be merciful in the way that God is merciful. That’s the kind of persecution he was into.

Today’s scripture begins with Saul on his way to Damascus to round up Christians from various synagogues who were a part of the Way. He was going to take them to Jerusalem to face punishment from the high priests of Herod’s court. On his way there, though, Saul had a dramatic encounter with the Risen Christ who struck him blind and told him to go to Damascus and wait for instructions. Meanwhile, the Lord appeared in a vision to a disciple named Ananias and told him to go to Straight Street where he would find a man named Saul of Tarsus. Ananias said, “You

mean *the* Saul of Tarsus? The infamous persecutor of Christians?” The Lord said, “Yes. I have given Saul a vision of a man named Ananias who is going to come heal him of his blindness.” “Wait, Ananias? That’s me. Are you talking about me? Because if you’re telling me to go track down Saul of Tarsus, you can forget it. He is notorious for being evil and merciless and a persecutor of Christians.” “Well that’s who I’m talking about. Go get him because I’ve chosen him to be an instrument to bring my name before the Gentiles.”

So Ananias tracks him down, lays hands on him, prays for him and heals Saul’s blindness and soon afterwards Saul was baptized and started proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogues. And thus begins the ministry of Saul of Tarsus, soon to be known as “Paul, the Apostle of Jesus.” Remember – to be considered an apostle -- one of the “sent” -- you had to walk with Jesus during his earthly ministry and be present when he said, “Go into all the world and make disciples.” Now, if you were one of the twelve disciples who *had* the honor of being one of Jesus’ called-and-sent apostles, how would *you* feel if someone came along and said, “Oh, I know I never met Jesus in person before. At least before his crucifixion and resurrection. And I know I’ve developed a really bad reputation as being an enemy of this emerging church, but check this out - Jesus appeared to me, as I was heading to Damascus to persecute Christians, and said that I’m an apostle too.” Think about how Peter, Jesus’ right hand man, might have felt about that. “Now wait, you’re telling me you saw Jesus ...” “No, no, I didn’t actually see him, because he struck me blind, but I did hear his voice.” “Riiight.” As we work through the Book of Acts, we’ll soon see that Peter and Paul had some ... issues that were hard to resolve.

What most preachers want to do with this passage from Acts 9, is focus on what a miracle it was for Jesus to transform this awful enemy of the church into the one responsible for expanding the church into the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire -- to the Gentiles, those who were not a part of the Jewish faith. This story speaks to God’s ability to radically transform a person. Saul of Tarsus even received a new name –

Paul the Apostle. And Paul would go on to write 25% of the New Testament. Sort of. Come to Thursday night Bible study and we'll say more about that. The point is, we think this story is all about Paul. You know who gets overlooked though? Ananias. Ever thought about how things might have turned out if Ananias said, "No" when the Lord told him to track down Saul?" He *tried* to object. He was like, "You're talking about the same Saul of Tarsus who oversaw the death of Stephen, the first Martyr of the church." Yes. Ananias found Saul, prayed for him, healed him, and baptized him so that he could receive the Holy Spirit, take on a new name, and fulfill his part of the Great Commission. What a strange relationship Ananias must have had with Saul.

Ron Hall and Denver Moore had one of the most unlikely friendships you could imagine. They were about as different as two men could be. Denver was a homeless Black man living on the streets of Fort Worth, Texas. He was a former sharecropper from Louisiana and had gone to prison for trying to rob a bus at gunpoint. Ron was white a bond trader turned art dealer, a married college graduate living in the suburbs with his wife and two kids. When Ron and his wife, Deborah, met Denver at a mission where they volunteered, an unlikely friendship formed. While their relationship started with the "haves" sharing with the "have nots," it quickly turned into a friendship between equals. When Deborah was diagnosed with liver cancer, Denver became her most faithful prayer warrior, pouring his heart out to God on her behalf. Her death was the catalyst for Ron and Denver to become more like brothers than friends. Both men discovered something in the other that they needed. Maybe there was a lesson to learn here. Maybe this was a surprise gift – one that could only be discovered when each of them opened himself to a friendship with someone who is about as different as a person could be. Quite often people come into our lives who we might not have chosen as friends for ourselves. Maybe you've met someone in your own life who is different from you in background, profession, beliefs, or other ways. You may not have sought them out, but God gave you a chance to receive the gifts that were placed in them.

Annianias and Saul were natural enemies. Maybe that sounds overstated, but think about it. At the beginning of this passage, these two were headed for a collision course, not a “bromance.” Saul was on his way to Damascus with a mission. According to the author, he was “still breathing threats of murder against the disciples of the Lord.” Again, this was the guy who supervised the execution of Steven. He was heading to Annianias’ territory. It’s not clear whether the folks in Damascus knew he was on the way, but if they did, there would be plenty of reasons for them to worry about it. God assures Annianias that Saul is “an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.” I’m not sure if that gave Annianias much comfort, but Annianias went to where God led him. I think there’s two important lessons here – 1.) Only God knows how God can use someone, no matter how lost or antagonistic they seem to us. 2.) God is full of surprises. Annianias didn’t know that Saul would become Paul the Apostle whose witness would forever change the spread of Christianity around the world, but that’s what happened. Surprise!

We should keep our eyes open to those around us, asking ourselves if God has called and led us into a holy friendship. After all, the most unlikely friendship that could have developed is the one between the Creator of the universe and us, the creation. Who could imagine that our Creator and Lord would long to become our friend even as antagonistic as we may have originally been to the idea. Annianias and Saul show us that God can call us to put aside our differences and to serve God together.

Benediction –

Go forth from this place with your eyes wide open  
as you journey into the wider world.

Love God and see Christ in each person you meet.

Give thanks always

and do not withhold love from any,

for we do not know who may yet turn to the light.