

Acts 9

Unraveled Perspectives

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This morning's sermon is the last in the *Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart* series. The last several weeks we have taken a look at stories in the Bible in which lives, plans, and even people have come unraveled. We have used those stories to learn how we might respond to the unraveling we are experiencing today. We will end the series with, perhaps, the most important message of all. This morning as we turn to the book of Acts, we will read the story we call "Saul's Conversion." But, as we read it, please note that Saul is not the only person who is changed as a result of the events of the story. And that's precisely what makes this story so important. This is Acts 9: 1-20:

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

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> 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." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." <sup>15</sup> 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; <sup>16</sup> I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” <sup>17</sup> 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.” <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, <sup>20</sup> and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

Christians, in general, really like this story. I suspect it is because on some level, our hope is wrapped up in the belief that people really do change. We want to believe that a “bad guy” can really become a “good guy,” and with a minimum of muss and fuss. And we want to believe that when people do change, it really matters, for their lives, for the lives of people close to them, and ultimately, for the world.

In this story, we see that what happened to Saul did not happen just to Saul. In her blog post titled, “Not Just Saul’s Story,” Presbyterian minister Rev. Beth Scibienski writes, “The story is about two worlds colliding because people listen for voices, hear voices and follow voices. The story isn't just about Saul and his new calling. It's about the new calling for his friends who had to lead their leader by the hand when needed. The story isn't just about Saul's blindness. It's about Ananias and the others having to see Saul as an instrument of God before it had happened.”

<http://www.bethscib.com/lectionary-reflections/not-just-sauls-story>

And I would add, this story is about all of the people to come after whose lives were changed when they began to follow the ways of Jesus, maybe even us.

This hope we have that people can and do change, that we, ourselves can truly change, is too often dimmed by our experiences which have shown us that the saying, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” is all too often true. However, a consistent theme in the Bible is that when God is the agent of change, all things are possible. Throughout the biblical narrative, real change, especially the kind of change we see in Saul’s story, “a complete 180,” is not primarily about us, but about God. It’s like suddenly, there is a light that goes on inside us that allows us

to risk seeing something new and that makes change possible. And often, it seems, there is no real explanation for that light going on. It's an epiphany...a God thing.

Some of us may be breathing a sigh of relief right now. "Perfect, God will do all the work and presto, change-o, the people will change." We can just wait for God to do the heavy lifting. Not so fast. In the story, you will note, Saul's change was not complete without Ananias, until Ananias touched him, he couldn't see a thing. When the scales fell from his eyes, he could see clearly, for the first time he understood who he was and who was meant to be. This would never have happened, though if Ananias hadn't responded to the voice and been willing to change first.

We have to give Ananias credit for that. It was courageous. Ananias' perception of Saul, like the rest who "belonged to the Way," was rooted in fear, and rightly so. The text refers to these early Jesus followers as the ones who "belonged to the Way" and I really like that, because instead of being identified by what they believed; they were identified by the way they lived. Being a Christian was practice, not theory. Certainly, they believed things about God, about Jesus, about faith, but they were known for the way they lived.

Saul was spending his life rounding up the people of the Way for detention, stoning, or other political and physical torture. He wasn't alone. He, and others, were working on behalf of the Sanhedrin who were assemblies of elders, appointed to sit as a tribunal in every city in Israel. The Sanhedrin operated like a religious court, maintaining Jewish law and tradition. They saw followers of the Way as a threat to their communities.

Knowing what we know about Saul's activities before his Damascus road encounter, it is pretty easy to assign him the role of bad guy. Saul was even introduced in the narrative world of Acts right before Stephen's petition for the forgiveness of those, including Saul, whose desire for purity and piety within the community results in Stephen's stoning. But, here's the thing, and I think this is important in our world today, I bet Saul did not see himself as a bad guy. I bet he saw himself as a faithful protector of Jewish law and tradition. He thought he, and the others who were rounding up these purveyors of false news, were working for the good of the whole, keeping those heretics out of the community. I imagine, in

his mind, the destructive, sometimes deadly, consequences of his purity campaign were completely justified.

This story has caused me to think about the people I put into groups and generalize. The people who have a different worldview than I do, the people I have decided do not have the best interests of the whole at heart. It has invited me to reflect on how they might see themselves. I would guess that most people see their own actions as right and good. And what about me? I would guess there are people who would think what I believe and how I live threaten the purity of Christianity in NE OK, definitely a heretic.

We do have the need to sort people, don't we? But, contrary to the surety of the sorting hat in the Harry Potter series, human beings are really not so easily sorted. We are a complicated species who do not fit so neatly in one group or another. And the older I get, the more convinced I am that a good deal of the sorting we do does not serve us very well. Sorting sets up hierarchy, us against them, it isolates, and excludes.

Last week I ended my sermon with a quote from Dr. Paul Farmer, "The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong in the world." It is sorting that enables us to create systems and legislation, mindsets, and ways of being in the world, that value some people over others. Sorting is why Black Lives Matter and Oklahomans for Equality need to exist because we have sorted Black people and people in the LGBTQ+ community out of community and equality and justice.

In this story, with special effects and epiphanies unlike anything most of us have ever experienced, we are supposed to learn that sometimes our perception of who is in and who is out and what the family of God looks like must change. In both Saul's and Ananias' stories we are reminded that sometimes when our lives unravel, when our worldview is turned upside-down, we have the opportunity for a holy, fresh start. We have an opportunity to stretch ourselves, to be called into uncharted territory.

I've been wondering if, in the midst of this pandemic, in the midst of significant division and social upheaval, maybe we are being called to see something new. My sense is most of us are tired of being divided, tired of sorting and being sorted. I think we are tired of arguing about masks and politics, tired of the tug of

war between “us and them,” whoever “us” and whoever “them” is. I said to a member this week that early on I hoped, as we lived through a pandemic, we would learn and appreciate that life is so very fragile and we shouldn’t waste it on division and hateful rhetoric. But, what I see, and even experience in my own heart and mind, is fear and, as I have said before, fear does not bring out the best in us, it causes us to close ranks and keep people out.

We, like the characters in this story, are called to expand our perception of who belongs. The welcome statement on our website homepage says, “We welcome all people into the life of the church, valuing diversity in culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, ability and theology. We believe God loves diversity and created each of us unique, in God’s image.” The leadership of this church voted in this statement as part of the process of becoming an open and affirming congregation. It is a beautiful statement, but only if we live it. If we say we welcome everyone and then we don’t, it has the power to hurt people, to show them, once again, that the church is not a safe place.

This is not a church just for Democrats. This is not a church just for people who see themselves as “progressive.” This is not even a church just for people who agree with the minister. It is a church for everyone, who wants to love and be loved, which means sometimes we will disagree. It means sometimes we will disappoint each other or see things on social media from another member (or even the minister) that tick us off.

We must remember that we are all at different places in our journey. God called a pretty unlikely person in Saul, to the work of planting churches and spreading the gospel message beyond Judaism, beyond the lines that were pretty firmly drawn around us and them. Saul, like all of us, was complicated and imperfect. Our hope hinges on our belief that people can change, but, the truth is, we rarely change by being kept on the outside. The day Ananias met Saul, he did more than lay hands on him, he called him, “Brother,” he included him. Friends, the ways in which we practice outrageous inclusion will change people, and that change will probably start with us.

We, Disciples Christian Church, all of us together, have been gathered for a purpose, not to build a bigger building, to save ourselves from God, or to make sure we believe all the same things. Realistically, we don’t have to save ourselves

or anyone from God. God loves everyone and if we have learned at all from this pandemic it is that big buildings aren't a necessity for community. Our true purpose is to invite people to encounter God's love by including them, for it is love that changes people, not arguing on social media, not scaring them with tales of fire and brimstone, not pronouncing them sinners and demanding they change. God's love changes people and it will change the world. It is God's love, expressed by God's people, that shows up when things have come unraveled. The world needs us to show up with that love, now more than ever. Amen.