

2nd Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

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*Acts 9:1-25*

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

*Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' 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, 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.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' 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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' 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.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

*For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' All who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.*

*After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.*

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As we continue our sermon series on the Acts of the Holy Spirit, we have marveled at her wondrous works so far in this narrative of the earliest of Christian communities. Today, we are spending time in what is perhaps the most well-known story in this book, Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. But before we continue our stroll through these stories, we must debrief on the ground that has been covered between today's story and the story we were told last week about the Holy Spirit healing the lame man by the Beautiful Gate.

So, since last week's story, the Christian movement, which in Acts is called "the Way," is growing by leaps and bounds. The movement is growing so fast, in fact, that the Apostles are having to delegate tasks to other leaders to manage the sheer load of work that is to be done. For example, there was a growing number of widows who depended on the generosity of the Christians for their livelihood. However, there was a conflict regarding the apportionment of such donations and, therefore, the Apostles appointed seven people to oversee the distribution. Essentially, this team can be considered the first ever diaconate. The leader of this group of deacons was a man named Stephen.

To make a long story short, Stephen did his job very well. In fact, he did it a little too well because his work and his testimony captured the attention of those who wished he would do so with a little more restraint and subtlety. Stephen's ministry was powerful, efficient, and brief. After testifying to his faith, he was taken to the streets and stoned by a mob. As his namesake, I certainly do hope that my ministry does not end the same way! Anyways, the text tells us that a young man named Saul was watching the stoning of Stephen and approved of the violent act. This subtle line introduces us to the man who is to take the main stage in just a few paragraphs!

Stephen is considered to be the first Christian martyr in these early days of the movement. In fact, Stephen's stoning set a bit of a precedent and the powers that be began to crack down on the movement with a series of persecutions intended to stifle the spread of the Gospel. However, in an incredibly ironic fashion, it actually did the exact *opposite*. You know how Dandelions spread? They pop up in your yard with those spheres of white seed spores. If you want them to go away, the worst thing you could possibly do is kick them because, once you do, the wind will carry the seeds to all the the ends of your yard.

The reason the early Christian movement actually benefited from the persecutions is because of the same idea: until the persecutions began, the followers of the Way were pretty centrally located in the region of Jerusalem and the outlying areas. However, as soon as the persecutions began, the Christians fled, taking the message of the Gospel with them. Like a mustard bush growing wild in a farmer's field or kudzu exploding on a hillside, Christianity is on the move. The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways indeed.

As the message grew, so too did the fervor with which Saul sought to silence it. Saul, we are told, was ravaging the early Christian movement, dragging women, men, and children into the streets and putting them in jail. Before today's story of his conversion, we don't know much about Paul - nothing about his background or his personality. The only thing the author of this book seems concerned about is that you and I know that he is enemy number one!!! The author wants us to put Saul up there with the likes of Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and the members of the Ku Klux Klan.

This makes it even more incredible what is about to happen to this young Saul character.

He joins the long list of unlikely characters in the Bible who become the vessels of God's work in the world. The same God that called out "Jacob, Jacob," the same God that called out "Abraham, Abraham," the same God that called out "Moses, Moses" now calls out "Saul, Saul!" And, then, any doubt that we might have had regarding the intimate relationship between Christ and his Church is dispelled when we hear Jesus shouting out to Saul, "why are you persecuting *me*?" Then the text tells us a most peculiar thing, it says that "although his eyes were open, he could see nothing." This delightful wordplay suggests that this divine encounter, this *theophany*, has opened Saul's eyes to the reality of his previous occupation. He is now to be used as an instrument of the Lord to spread the very movement that until so recently he had devoted his life to destroying. Now Saul's devotion has been increased and redirected to achieve the purpose of the Spirit whose movement will not be hindered by any person or entity.

Several aspects of this story are worth lifting up and here I must give much credit to William Willimon and his helpful commentary on the Book of Acts.<sup>1</sup>

First of all, this text challenges us to acknowledge that conversions, theophanies, and intense spiritual revelations are, more often than not, God's doing and not ours. Before the conversation of Saul, the text gives Saul a very active role in his own actions; Saul goes here, Saul goes there, Saul takes the initiative and appears to be the one in control of his movements. However, today's passage brings with it a very abrupt change in Saul's life: Saul is no longer in the driver's seat! Saul, whether he likes it or not, is now along for the ride and is at the mercy of the Spirit that struck him blind in order that he might truly see. This reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not a commodity to be stored and used at our own convenience or desire. Rather, the Holy spirit is a truly un-tamable presence that is gifted to us in accordance with God's will and *not* our own. This is why we pray every Sunday for the Holy Spirit to guide us in our reading of the Word. We recognize that she is in control and not us!

Secondly, this text reminds us that to be a Christian convert means to depend on others. Because Saul is now at the whim of the Holy Spirit, his blindness causes him to depend on others in ways that would have been inconceivable prior to his divine encounter. Before that Damascus experience, Saul is going hither and thither under his own control. However, now that he is blind, he is forced to be led by the hands by his companions to safety. Just a few verses later, Saul, who was so recently the persecutor, is now the *persecuted!* He is trying to escape a city and he must rely on his new Christian brothers and sisters to lower him hidden in a basket from the city walls to escape his enemies who had so recently been his colleagues.

Thirdly, this text reminds us that even our most hated enemies are capable of being used by God to further the Gospel! This keeps us on our toes and makes us think twice about the people we convince ourselves are "beyond redemption." Or, to think about it in another way, the person or persons we currently consider our enemies just might be the people God is about to tell us to work *with* and not *against!* God has a pretty twisted sense of humor.

Finally, this text reminds us that, like Saul, we are "instruments" to be used for God's will. God tells Ananias that Saul is to become an "instrument" because he has been chosen. The greek word for "instrument" (used here in today's passage) literally meant a container or a vessel whose purpose was to carry something. Paul, on his dramatic journey, has been forcefully "emptied," so to speak, in order that he might be filled with God's grace and be used as a vessel to carry that grace to the ends of the earth.

Each of us, in our own ways, both as individuals and as a worshipping community, is on a "Damascus road." All of us are at the curious whim of a powerful and mysterious Holy Spirit. All of us called to depend on others for help so that we might help others. All of us are called to be open to the reality that God can and does use everyone, even those we really don't like, to fulfill God's purpose. All of us are vessels that carry God's grace, God's goodness, and God's guidance to those who need it. We are all vessels, some of us cracked, others stained, some misshapen and perhaps even broken, but nevertheless capable of carrying the good news that we receive at this Table and inviting others to be those very vessels with us!

Come, Holy Spirit! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen!

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<sup>1</sup>Willimon, William H. Interpretation--Acts. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1988.