“Why do you persecute me?” That’s the question addressed to Saul in this morning’s lesson from Acts. Saul is on his way to Damascus. He’s on a righteous mission. He’s going to find those followers of the Way and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial.

Saul is a Jew. His ancestors were of the tribe of Benjamin. Like most of the Israelites, Saul’s ancestors were driven from Palestine by the Babylonian army and forced to live in exile. When the exile ended and the Jews were allowed to return to the land of Israel, Saul’s ancestors chose to remain where they had settled on the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea. So, Saul was born in Tarsus, which had become the prosperous capital of the Roman province of Cilicia. Therefore, Saul is a Roman citizen. He is well educated. He is well off.

Even though he hasn’t grown up in the land of Israel, Saul’s Jewish heritage is important to him. He is a descendent of Abraham and proud of it. As a young man, he traveled to Jerusalem to study Torah. Saul is a Pharisee who believes that survival and salvation will come only through scrupulous observance of the Law.

The Pharisees were part of a renewal movement within Judaism that applied the Law to just about every aspect of life. The people who stayed within the lines drawn by the Pharisees and kept the Law were seen as pure and holy. And, their holiness allowed them to be included in the religious and social life of the community. Those, who did not observe the Law, as Saul and his fellow Pharisees thought they should, were seen as unclean, as defiled, and viewed as a danger to the community and excluded from its midst.

The followers of the Way were in the latter category for Saul. Their behavior and their teaching crossed the line. They were made unclean by their less than rigorous observance of the Law. They taught and healed in the name of a man who had been rightly condemned and put to death by the proper authorities. And, worse of all, they insisted on putting this Jesus on the same level as God.

Saul saw the followers of the Way, the Christian sect as a threat to salvation and to the survival of Judaism. Something had to be done to stop them. And, Saul saw himself as one of those called to protect the faith. Having rounded up, imprisoned and executed those followers he could in Jerusalem, Saul is now on his way to Damascus. He’s on a mission to arrest the Christians who have escaped from Jerusalem.
He’s got letters to extradite them. He plans to take them back and put them on trial.

It’s about 140 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus, about a week’s journey if you’re walking. As Saul approaches Damascus, a light from heaven flashes around him, he falls to the ground, and hears a voice say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul asks, “who are you Lord?” And, the voice answers, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up, enter the city, and you will be told what to do.” Saul is blind, though his eyes are open, he cannot see. He has to be led by the hand into Damascus.

A couple things strike me. The first is the statement the Lord Jesus makes to Saul, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” The words seem a bit odd to me in that Jesus has died, risen and ascended into heaven by this time. It’s now at least three years later. Clearly, it isn't the flesh and blood Jesus who walked the earth that Saul is persecuting. So, the Lord Jesus must be referring to his followers, to the Body of Christ, the early Christians when he says, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” This isn't the first time Jesus connects how others are treated with the way he himself is treated. Remember his words in Matthew’s gospel as he separates the sheep from the goats: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brother and sisters you do to me.” By persecuting those who follow him, Saul is persecuting Jesus.

The second thing that strikes me is that God doesn’t ignore, doesn’t give up on, doesn’t reject Saul because of his way of looking at things or his behavior. God doesn’t declare Saul “unclean” or “defiled” and abandon or exclude him. I’d be tempted to write Saul off, to stay as far away from him as possible. And, I suspect I wouldn’t be alone in this.

But, God sees potential for good, even for greatness in Saul. So he does something to get his attention. He’s does it in a pretty dramatic way. He strikes him with lightening. The Lord Jesus confronts Saul. He puts him in touch with his blindness. Where before Saul was absolutely clear that his way of seeing and living were righteously correct, now he knows only darkness. Where before Saul was a leader, now he has to be led by the hand. He waits in darkness for three days. It’s like he’s in the tomb. It’s like he’s dying to his old way of seeing things, to his old way of being.
In the meantime, there is a follower of the Way, a Christian disciple named Ananias who has a vision. In that vision, the Lord Jesus calls him, tells him to go to Saul and lay hands on him so that he can see. Ananias may have been among those who fled from Jerusalem to escape persecution. He clearly knows who Saul is and what he’s been up to. Ananias openly expresses his doubts and he questions the Lord, “How can this man who has persecuted your followers be the one called by God to take the Good News to the Gentiles?” This makes no sense to him. But, he’s willing to trust Jesus, to act, to follow God’s direction even though it makes no sense to him, even though he’s probably scared to death.

So, Ananias goes. He enters the house of Judas on Straight Street and greets Saul as a brother. He lays hands on Saul and Saul’s sight is restored. Saul is healed not only of his physical blindness but also of his “blindness” to Jesus as “the way, the truth, and the life.” Saul is baptized and goes on to become a leader in the early church and one of the greatest Christian missionaries of all time.

What Ananias does absolutely amazes me. He’s the person, the character in this morning’s lessons who captures my attention and my admiration. Nevertheless, I suspect we should look at both Saul and at Ananias and ask some questions, “how are we like them?” And, “what does the Lord Jesus have to say to us when we’re in their shoes?”

Let’s start with Saul. Under what circumstances might the Lord Jesus say to Christians today, “why do you persecute me?” Initially, this may seem an absurd question. Jesus died, was risen, and ascended into heaven almost 2000 year ago. But, if we take seriously Jesus’ words, “whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me” we need to ask, “are there ways in which our understandings of purity and holiness persecute the brothers and sisters of Jesus and thereby Jesus himself? Are there ways in which our criteria for what is clean and what is defiled exclude others and thereby Jesus himself from life in community? How do we know which rules are life giving and which are not? How do we know where to draw the lines?

These are disturbing and challenging questions. Questions like these threaten our sense of order and what we think keeps us safe. Questions like these remind us of our fallibility as earthly creatures. We’re all blind to some extent. Like Saul, we all see things through the filters given us by our culture. None of us has the clarity of vision,
the omniscience of God. I think we can trust that God will try to get our attention when our blindness lead us to hurt others. I think we can trust that God will confront us through the truthful works spoken in love by another child of God. And, if that doesn’t work, I suspect God will find a more dramatic way to get our attention just like he did with Saul.

As I said a minute ago, it’s Ananias who amazes me, who captures my attention and my admiration. Ananias doesn’t leave his mind or his experience at the door when he’s interacting with the Lord. What he’s hearing doesn’t make sense to him. It doesn’t fit his experience. So he expresses his doubts. He questions Jesus. Jesus doesn’t rebuke him for this. Instead, the Lord shares his wider vision. Ananias is willing to take the risk. He trusts that Jesus knows what he’s talking about. And, he’s willing to do what Jesus asks. Ananias goes to the house of Judas on the street called Straight. He address as “brother” a man who may in fact have killed his friends and made it necessary for him to flee from Jerusalem.” Ananias is willing to be God’s agent of healing and new life. And, look how it all turned out. Saul becomes St. Paul.

But Ananias didn’t know this would happen. In some ways it would have been so much safer for Ananias to keep his distance, to let someone else work with God to bring out the transformation of Saul.

How many times have you and I been scared into silence when prejudice is expressed and acted upon? How often have we chosen to keep a safe distance and not get involved?

In our baptismal covenant, we promise to work for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being. This isn’t some new, liberal agenda. The commitment to stand with those who are marginalized and oppressed is as old as the Bible. God for centuries has challenged the Sauls of this world and has called his people to do the same. For centuries, God has sought to involve humanity in his passion for mercy and justice. Ananias was willing to take the risk and work with God as a agent of transformation and healing. May we have the courage and the willingness to follow in his footsteps.