

June 21, 2020
Farmville Baptist
Acts 9
The Lesson We're Still Struggling to Learn
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Today we are continuing our series on lessons from the early church. This morning's text brings us a very difficult lesson, one that the church has struggled to learn across the ages and if we're honest, it's one we're still struggling to learn.

The story is a familiar one to most of us. As we talked about last week, the early church is experiencing severe persecution and you remember that's what drives the disciples out of Jerusalem, that's what takes Philip first to Samaria and then to his divine appointment with the Ethiopian eunuch. The church is being persecuted and Saul is in the middle of it. The opening verses of chapter 8 tell us that Saul is ravaging the church by entering house after house dragging off both men and women and committing them to prison. In chapter nine, the text we heard earlier, Saul is still breathing threats and murder against the disciples. He is so passionate about this mission to clear out the Christians that he goes to the high priest asking for letters to present to the synagogues - so that if he finds any believers in Damascus he can bring them bound to Jerusalem for punishment.

Paul is one zealous and angry man. Have you ever wondered what makes him hate the followers of Jesus so much? That is often our response when we feel threatened and or when we are afraid of something isn't it. I wonder what Saul might be afraid of. Scripture doesn't tell us, but it seems clear that he feels compelled to defend Judaism, **and maybe even God**, from this perceived threat.

You know how the story unfolds. While Saul is on the road to Damascus, a bright light flashes, a voice speaks to him from heaven, and Saul is left lying blind in the middle of the road.

(PAUSE) All of a sudden, the powerful zealot is left powerless. The man who was leading the charge against the church must now be led into Jerusalem by another. The man who has been throwing believers in jail finds himself in his own personal prison . It's an extraordinary reversal.

For three days Saul is without sight and he doesn't eat or drink. Is this three day period a coincidence --- or does it mirror the three days that Jesus was in the tomb? Is Saul experiencing a death of his old ways before he is resurrected as a new person?

Next, Luke tells us there is a man named Ananias. Try to put yourself in his shoes. God calls his name in a vision. And Ananias immediately answers, "Here I am Lord." I'd bet he wished he had heard the assignment before he gave such a willing answer, don't you? The assignment he is given sounds high-risk, crazy even. Go to Saul, God says, lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight. Ananias knows this name, and if he's smart, he fears it. If he's smart, he steers clear of the murdering Saul. So when Ananias gets his assignment, he voices his skepticism to God "I love his ability to be honest with God, don't you?"

God replies, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." So, Ananias goes and lays his hands on Saul. Did you notice the words he uses? "Brother Saul. Brother Saul. The Lord Jesus who appeared to you has sent me so that you might regain your sight AND be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Ananias welcomes Saul as a brother; his conversion is authentic, but it is not an end in itself. Saul has been converted, and called -- called to spread the gospel. Like Abram and Sarai he is given a new name "Paul" and he becomes as zealous for the Lord as he was passionate against the early church. During his missionary travels, he plants churches all over Asia Minor, and his correspondence with those churches make up a third of our New Testament.

My study on this text reminded me that Paul's conversion is one of four conversion stories in this part of Acts. First we hear about the Samaritans, then the Ethiopian eunuch, then Saul ó the persecutor of the church, and next week we'll talk about Cornelius the Centurion. Do you note that these people are all what we could call "outsiders"? Paul is a Jew, so he is an insider by birth, but his persecution of the church puts him at odds, on the outs, with the early believers.

In a very real way Luke is reminding us what Jesus taught - that this radical new faith is open to everyone. To people of mixed heritage like the Samaritans, to soldiers who serve the Emperor like Cornelius, to murderous zealots like Paul, to people with altered bodies and alternate sexualities like the Ethiopian Eunuch. (PAUSE) This radical inclusiveness is a message that the church has always struggled to learn. While many have modeled welcome, throughout our history we see that the persecuted ó the church ó has too often become the persecutor.

Christians and Muslims have been at odds ó warring over the Holy Land for over two millennia now. One of the better known acts of sanctioned violence by the church began in 1095 when [Pope Urban II](#) called for the [First Crusade](#) in a sermon at the [Council of Clermont](#). We condemn jihad and acts of terror today, as we should, but we need to remember that that the church has perpetuated similar violence.

As we mentioned a few weeks ago, by the 1400's countries like Britain, Spain and Portugal were sending out explorers who persecuted indigenous people in the name of God in every country they touched. Whites enslaved Africans in many countries, including ours, for over two centuries. Many of you may know that the Southern was started in the mid-1800's when Baptists in the north refused to appoint slave owners as missionaries. Friday we celebrated the emancipation of the last slaves in 1865, but as we have seen in recent weeks, we still have work to do for all people to realize their constitutional right to equality.

Throughout our history, the church has also used Scripture and edicts from church leaders to oppress women and more recently those who identify as LGBT. Although each Baptist church is autonomous, and may discern the extent to which they welcome people of other races, genders and sexual orientation into membership and leadership; these congregations can still find themselves kicked out of local, state, and national denominational fellowships if their actions offend those agencies.

Several years ago when I was pondering and lamenting the ways the church continues to exclude and oppress, I saw something in Saul's conversion story that I had never seen before. When Jesus speaks to Saul from heaven on the road to Damascus, he asks him a question. The question is not, "Why are you persecuting my people?" Or "Why are you persecuting the church?" What is the question? "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (PAUSE)

Friends, the reality is this: if we say that we are all made in God's image, then when we persecute others ó we are indeed persecuting God. (PAUSE)

When I think about all the harm that Christians have done in the name of God over the centuries, I marvel that indigenous people around the world, that African Americans, that women, that people who identify as LGBTQ ó that any of these folks - have been interested in becoming Christ followers at all. I am grateful that they have been able to look past our mistakes to the God who is good and to the Christ that came so that all might be free.

Of course, not all Christians have been oppressors and persecutors, please don't hear me say that. I believe that many oppressors, like Saul, think they are doing the right thing. Some of us, like Paul, have been taught to interpret Scripture literally and to use it to exclude, to fear, and even to despise those who are different. Others of us, myself included at times, have chosen not to become involved; to remain quietly on the sidelines. About three years ago, CBF engaged in

what was known as the Illumination Project, a major survey effort to see how our member churches feel about and are dealing with LGBT issues. The study group learned that over 50% of the churches they surveyed were completely silent on issues related to sexuality. Friends, even it makes us uncomfortable, we can't bury our heads in the sand about any of these issues, we have to be talking about them.

Why? One reason is that culture needs to hear from the church about these issues. Another reason is that whether the issue is sexuality or racism or refugees, or mental health or addiction, when we are silent, we are complicit with injustice. In 2017, Brian McLaren spoke at the CBF national meeting - and he had a good word for those of us who were over 50. He implored us not waste the social and spiritual capital we have earned but to use our power and influence for good in the world. He also urged the millennials not to waste their one wild and precious youth but to invest it in fresh and authentic ways of loving God and loving our neighbors - all of them.

As convicting as this passage is, there is good news here as well. As Saul was persecuting the church, a member of the church had already prayed for his forgiveness. We first meet Saul in Acts 7:58-60 - at the stoning of Stephen. "Then they (the religious leaders) dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. He was there that day - watching and learning.

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." It mirrors Jesus' prayer, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (PAUSE)

Stephen modeled grace, and forgiveness and inclusive love in Acts, and there are those who do the same for us today.

You may be familiar with John Dau, one of the lost boys of Sudan. His people were subject to intense persecution during the civil war there, and he, along with many others, fled to Kenya where at the age of 17 he learned to read, write and do basic math in a refugee camp. Rather than becoming bitter and becoming a persecutor, Dau immigrated to America where he worked to put himself through school. Recently, he served as a global scholar in residence at Collegiate School here in Richmond where he taught responsible citizenship and basic values through African folk tales. However, his primary work is through his foundation which has fed 215,000 people, vaccinated 12,000 children and provided surgery for cataracts and cleft palates. African villagers have learned to manage malaria, pneumonia, and intestinal disorders through John's work. Like the apostle Paul, John reports, "God saved me for a reason. I am fulfilling what God told me to do, and that is to help others."

Churches are also responding to the call to serve those who often feel like "the other" in innovative ways. Recently Shady Grove UMC in Hanover VA raised \$25,000 to help the McShin Foundation open its first sober home in Hanover County. The women who live in the home are recovering from substance abuse and they experience the stigma associated with that struggle. One woman who has 2 college degrees and no criminal record spoke on the condition of anonymity. She feared that revealing her identity would hurt her job prospects. "People judge us so hard," she said. The church hopes that it can be a spiritual shoulder for the ladies to lean on as they work toward full recovery.

In Farmville, Farmville Cares and many of our local churches have banded together to help the most vulnerable in our communities, especially during the recent pandemic.

Like Ananias, these courageous people have answered the call. They have put aside their own fear, and discomfort to empower African villagers, to walk alongside those in recovery, and

to house, feed and support the least of these among us. I pray that as we hear that call on our own lives, we may do the same.

Sources:

Robert Wall, Exegetical Perspective, Feasting on the Word, p. 405.

New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Acts, p. 149

Brian McLaren's plenary address at CBF National meeting, June 29, 2017.