

April 29, 2018 MRUC Rev. Debra K. Schneider
Acts 9:1-20 The Conversion of Saul Sacred Darkness

“Meanwhile, Saul, was still breathing out threats against the Lord’s disciples.” Meanwhile, Alek Minassian was still breathing out threats against the women of Toronto..... It is as old as time, this will to destroy those who challenge us in our ways of seeing the world; our ways of being and acting in the world--those who perhaps challenge our privileged place in the scheme of things, or even thwart our personal desires.

This paradoxical human drive towards conformity and at the same time domination and supremacy is a great mystery.

Just look around at the world! The thing that strikes us about the most beautiful of places is the diversity, complexity, the richness of colour and hue--of size, shape and texture.

Listen as you move through the world, and you will be astonished at the of the soundscape the surrounds us—contrast the thunderous sounding of a powerful waterfall to the lilting call of a songbird; or the sound of a gentle breeze rustling through the grasses against the joyful shouts and laughter of children.

It is a curious thing, this desire, to shape one another in our own image, to deny the diversity that is inherent in our humanity, to say one part is better, more precious or superior to another.

The People of the Way who Saul is oppressing are all Jews! Still in his eyes, they deserve arrest, beatings, jailing, or worse. Why? Because they are followers of Jesus--Jesus in whom they see and experience the light and love of God in such extraordinary ways that they insist that in and through him God had come to be among us.

My mother used to say: “What gets your attention gets you.” What is getting your attention these days? What is occupying your hearts and minds in the in between times of your daily lives? What are you striving for? Hoping for? Working for? What bugs you, or simply drives you crazy? “What gets your attention gets you.”

The followers of Jesus have caught Saul’s attention!

Saul’s Damascus Road encounter with Jesus doesn’t come out of the blue. Saul has been paying attention. He has been taking notes.

Earlier in the Book of Acts, we read about the stoning of a disciple named Stephen. The report reads, “....meanwhile, (those preparing to stone Stephen) laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” Saul was there as “Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus receive my spirit.” Saul was there when falling to his knees, Stephen cried out... “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” ... Saul was there, giving approval.

Not long afterwards, Saul asks for and is granted permission to extend his campaign of persecution into the synagogues of Damascus.

It is then that the risen Christ really gets his attention!

Struck down and blinded by a powerful light, groveling in the dirt and groping in the darkness, Saul hears the voice of Jesus, and is led by the hand.... to straight street-- to the house of a man named Judas.

What would it take for Jesus to get your attention?

The ancient Psalmist writes, “In your mercy, O God, my foundations you shook and in recognizing my separation from you. I was dismayed.” “In your mercy, O God, my foundations you shook and in recognizing my separation from you. I was dismayed.”

The foundations of Saul of Tarsus are shaken, and the birthing of Paul, Apostle to the gentiles is commenced.

Meanwhile, of course, Christ has also been doing business with a man by the name of Ananias. Ananias is told in a vision to go to the man known as Saul of Tarsus. Ananias knows about Saul. He has heard of Saul’s zeal to arrest, beat, and imprison Jews like himself—Jews who are followers of Jesus. He is

understandably afraid. Still, he goes. And as he enters the room where Saul sits, Ananias greets Saul with two powerful, healing, life transforming words: “Brother Saul.”

Can you imagine? “Brother Saul.” With these two simple words he welcomes and blesses Saul, and extends to him the hand of peace.

“Brother Saul.” Chosen instrument, broken vessel, zealot extraordinaire. Ananias, lays hands on him, the scales fall from Saul’s eyes, and Ananias baptizes Saul, even as the Holy Spirit falls upon him. Saul is forever changed. Saul is born again, given a fresh identity, and a reformed passion, purpose and zeal. As a mark of the profound change that has occurred within him, Saul is given a new name: Paul, Apostle to the gentiles.

Paul’s passions will no longer be powered by the zealotry of self-righteousness, fear, hatred or violence; rather they will be fueled by humility, and a profound love for Christ and for all people. His desire will no longer be to destroy but to nurture; no longer to impose but to persuade; no longer to divide but to draw people together into gracious and loving community.

Later he will write a letter to a church he has founded in Philippi. He will tell them that all that he was, all that he had accomplished, all that he had stood for in his previous life, were as filthy rags... as rubbish, in comparison to the wonder of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. He writes, “... now, In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul, becomes a breaker of the boundaries between Jew and Gentile.

Today we see a similar breaking of boundaries between the followers of the many faith traditions of the world.

Evidence of this abounds—perhaps first and foremost during times of great tragedy such as witnessed in our city this week. In the face of tragedy, people of all faiths and no faith are coming together to grieve, to comfort one another, to proclaim that love is the way that we will choose—whatever our differences may be.

Of course, this is not true everywhere, nor is it true of everyone.

There are still those who would seek to diminish, destroy, distance or disadvantage those who differ from them, disagree with them, or somehow threaten their sense of place in the world. There are still those who will choose violence over peace-making—those who will continue to choose hatred and bigotry over affirmation and love.

Barak Obama speaking at the 2106 National Prayer Breakfast is quoted as saying, “I pray, that our differences ultimately are bridged; that the God that is in each of us comes together, and we don't divide.”

We dare not be merely philosophical about these things. We must act. Like Ananias, we must be courageous if a new birthing is to occur. We must take a stand for love—wherever and among whomever we find ourselves.

May God teach us, like Ananias to stretch out our hands in blessing. May we learn to address, even our enemy with gentleness and faith, “Brother Saul,” Ananias said, Jesus has sent me.”