

“Persecuting Jesus”
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We are now in our third Sunday of Easter. Spring is officially here and seems committed to stay, finally. The echoes of our grand Easter celebrations still ring in our ears. This past week at Wednesday Night Fellowship, we celebrated the ministries that have flourished this past year in this interim time before the Interim. This coming week, we will lift up and celebrate the work of Deborah Mesimer, 28 faithful years of supporting and guiding the ministry and work of this church, while at the same time, we welcome our new Church Administrator, Suzanne Russell. And yes, we can finally announce the arrival of our new Interim Pastor who will be here with us in less than a month. From my mouth to your ears, *that* feels like Resurrection, my friends! Can I get an AMEN? Indeed, new life is being born all around us!

As we celebrate and ponder the mysteries of Resurrection and what they mean to us as a church and individually, we are invited to remember the stories of the disciples’ encounters with the Risen Lord, what Resurrection meant for them and formation of the church. This morning’s text comes from the book of Acts where we learn about the birth and growth of the early church. We will be focusing specifically on the conversion of Saul to the apostle Paul. Most of what we know about Paul, of course, comes from our readings of his letters that are in our Bible, detailing his itinerate ministry as well as his theological musings that have shaped the historical church in almost indefinable ways.

But before we turn to the text, I think we need to spend a little more time with Saul to fully appreciate the power of this conversion story. Saul was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, to be more specific. He was well versed in the Hebrew scriptures, and he was part of a social movement that was trying to reform Judaism to a more orthodox and strict observance of God’s law. In short, they were just trying to be more faithful to God. We often see Pharisees as the “bad guys” through our Christian lenses, but truly, that is an unfair distinction. We need to remember the whole of Jewish history, the ways that the consequences of past sinfulness was usually met with some form of loss, destruction, and/or exile. So it’s helpful to understand that they had good intentions. They thought that they were seeking wholeness and salvation for the good of the people.

It’s also helpful to know that these ancient Christians in our story were not known as Christians yet. At this point in the early church, they were called the people of the Way in reference to their commitment to following the ways of Jesus. Put more simply, they were devout, observant Jews who were informed by another social movement inspired



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by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were not known by a set of beliefs; rather, they were known by their actions.

So now we encounter Saul who, in his misguided zeal for the love of God, is looking to snuff out this social movement, once and for all. I will be reading from Acts 9:1-20. Listen to God's word for you today:

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² 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.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ 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.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ 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,¹² 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."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."¹⁵ 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;¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

To be sure, Saul, and Paul for that matter, was an intense guy. He did nothing passively, subtly, or quietly before or after his conversion. He was so filled with conviction and zeal for his beliefs, that he requested to be deputized by the chief priest to arrest anyone who followed the Way and was a supporter of the death penalty for such crimes. In fact, we are first introduced to Saul in chapter 7 for the martyrdom of Stephen. Saul outwardly encouraged and supported the stoning of Stephen.¹ By today's definitions, he was what we would call a fundamentalist or an extremist.

¹ Acts 7:58-8:3.

And this extreme religiosity is not unique to the Pharisees or Judaism. Our modern age has, in many ways, been defined by acts of violence or terrorism with so-called religious justifications. The most obvious examples involve Muslim extremists which has **unfairly** led to a culture of Islamophobia. But lest we get led astray thinking that fundamentalism is a byproduct of the other Abrahamic religions, we need to remember and be honest about the horrors committed in the name of Jesus Christ and on behalf of Christianity.

Augustine, one of our early-hallowed theologians that we quote to this day, encouraged forced conversions.² The Siege of Jerusalem in 1099 among many more crusades and wars, the Inquisition spanning the 12th through 14th centuries, Martin Luther's lesser known anti-Semitic writings which were used to justify the Holocaust,³ European Christians slaughtering indigenous people in the New World and forcing conversions of their children, witch trials, clergy defending slavery during the Civil War, clergy defending segregation during the Civil Rights movement, and on and on. Even today, we read of increased suicide among homosexual teens following so-called conversion therapy by "well-meaning Christians." In all of these cases, people had the conviction and zeal on par with Saul. They loved the Lord so much that they lost all reason, and they converted, conquered, and murdered in the name of God.

It should also be said that fundamentalism or extremism is not limited to the religious realm either. It has bled over into our political system, and an analysis of our political landscape reveals deeply entrenched and divided points of views fueled by the contradictory moral impulses of the Right vs. the Left. We can't seem to get anything done in our community, our state, or our country, because any attempt at rational thought or compromise is criticized for betraying one polarized political camp or the other.

And it has reached violent proportions. How are the hate crimes, abortion clinic bombings, and night club shootings not a function of the zeal of extremism? The fact is that we can all become so filled with our own sense of virtue and self-righteousness, that we divide into camps, we name our enemies, and we excuse the destruction and violence as collateral damage, necessary to protect our viewpoints and our freedom.

So while we fight, alienate and refuse to budge on church politics within our denominations, who out in the world misses out on the message of the good news of Jesus Christ? While we debate the structure of healthcare, who misses out on critical medications or life-saving treatments? While we fight over taxes, who misses out on a quality education or a well-equipped police force? Who goes hungry or continues to live and perhaps die on our streets? Who dies in detention centers while we continue to war over immigration? And finally, how many more of our children have to die while we do nothing about guns or mental healthcare because everyone is so full of

² *A Treatise Concerning the Correction of the Donatists*

³ *On Jews and Their Lies* (1543)

themselves, so full of their personal self interest, and entrenched in their own camps and tribes? And we are all guilty of it.

On the surface, as people who are already Christians, it is tempting to think we have nothing to learn from Paul's conversion to Christianity. But I submit to you that when we become fundamentalists of our own viewpoints religious or otherwise, we, like Saul, persecute Jesus. And we know what happened to Saul next. Through his fasting and blindness for three days, he entered his own tomb of darkness and despair before the scales were removed, and he was resurrected into new life. The life of murderous fundamentalism had finally died, and he had been born into a life of love and reconciliation. And the rest, as they say, is history.

So I'm wondering: Is that the wake up call we need? With each death count following a mass shooting, I keep wondering if this is the tomb of which we have been assigned. This is the tomb of darkness that will finally wake us up and remove the scales from our eyes. But as the death toll rises and as our country draws further and further apart, we continue to walk in darkness, and it terrifies me.

Tuesday night upon learning of the shooting at UNCC, Rachel and I were frantically contacting church parents and UNCC students of this church to make sure they were safe. Thankfully, they are safe, but as a fellow parent, I wonder how those parents will find the courage to let their children return to school to pursue the education they have every right to pursue feeling safe and secure. Every morning, I question my own sanity of allowing my daughters to go to school, because I'm afraid they will be shot. If I get a text from one of them midday, my heart races, because I'm afraid they are in a closet, in a lockdown. Many of our dinner discussions are not about high school crushes or AP exams. They are about the unstable kid in one of their classes that they are worried will show up with a gun. I kid you not: I wrote that last sentence on Friday morning, and it came up at dinner on Friday night.

A colleague and friend of mine, Rev. Luke Mabry who serves at Matthews Presbyterian Church, was interviewed on WFAE this week after hosting a prayer vigil for the family of one of the young men who was killed at UNCC. Luke said he has preached about guns with every school shooting that has occurred and that he is *tired* of preaching about guns. We all are, Luke. And for those of you who are already crafting your email to me about preaching politics from the pulpit, let me be clear that this is not about politics. Politicians and corporations and special interest groups will tell us that it's about politics to collect our votes, but it is not. This is about people; this about human welfare. This is about God's great and passionate love for humanity and the call for us to move beyond the fundamentalism of Saul so that we can get to work in the Kingdom of God.

How much collateral damage can we afford before we will move past our fundamentalism and be born into the new Way? How long will we persecute Jesus? The incredibly good news in all this is that the Easter promise of resurrection is always possible. It's never too late no matter how bad it gets, because God does not give up on

us. And my friends, we are the people of The Way. And as people of the Way, we already know the path to love and reconciliation and healing and wholeness. It's been spelled out for us again and again.

It's not about our beliefs, it's about our actions. And just as Saul transformed to Paul by being baptized and fed with holy food, we baptized a little bit of our future and our hope this morning. We have promised to support and nourish that future. And we are empowered and strengthened to do that work, through Christ's invitation to this holy table, to partake of holy food, to do God's holy purposes. As people of the Way, let us have the courage of Ananias to tear down these walls that divide us. Let us release our staunchly held views in favor of coming together to protect our children, to house and feed the poor, to help the mentally ill, to welcome the stranger. Let us usher in a new day of unity and reconciliation, of coming together to heal and love one another that all of humanity might feel safe and flourish. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, AMEN.