



THE REORIENTATION OF VOCATION IV WHEN JESUS COMES CRASHING IN

In the final months of World War II, the Allies had crossed into Germany. In the book *Citizen Soldier*, Capt. F.W. Norris recounted an incident with a wounded and captured German soldier. “The most seriously wounded was a young SS sergeant who looked just like one of Hitler’s supermen. He had led the attack. He was bleeding copiously and badly needed some plasma.’ One of Norris’s medics started giving him a transfusion. The wounded German, who spoke excellent English, demanded to know if there was any Jewish blood in the plasma. The medic said he didn’t know, in the United States people didn’t make such a distinction. The German said that if couldn’t have a guarantee that there was no Jewish blood he would refuse treatment.

‘I had been listening and had heard enough,’ Norris remembered. ‘I turned to this SS guy and in very positive terms I told him I really didn’t care whether he lived or not, but if he did not take the plasma he would certainly die. He looked at me calmly and said, ‘I would rather die than have any Jewish blood in me.’

‘So he died.’”

This Nazi’s zeal for purity is sad, reprehensible, and hopefully beyond our personal recognition. This story reminds us of a bigotry that is borne out of a falsely considered zeal. Like here in this WWII story, the driving force is a quest for purity, a desire to limit access only to those who are like you. For the German sergeant this meant death over tainted blood.

The motivations of Saul of Tarsus were similar. Saul was a religious zealot, a fanatical purist. He held the coats of those who stoned the Deacon Stephen, and we are told in Acts 8 that Saul was “ravaging the church.”

Saul was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were purists in their own personal faith and defenders of the overall purity of the Jewish faith. Saul and his fellow Pharisees went to extreme lengths to maintain their purity. They kept the kosher laws, they maintained the Sabbath code, they knew their scriptures, and they had no relations with those who were impure. Their motivation was to guard their own sanctity and equally to guard the sanctity and holiness of God. By any definition, they were religious zealots.

If you know the Gospel stories then you know that Jesus and the Pharisees had a long-running dispute. The Pharisees were frequently incensed with what they considered to be Jesus’ lax religious practices and with his easy relationships with people that the Pharisees considered unclean and inherently and pervasively sinful. That was the Pharisees, and that was Saul.

At some level the motivation for this is pure human nature. We want control. Darrell Guder in his book *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* illuminates the concept of our sinful desire to manipulate and direct all things and all people around us with the German phrase: “Trust is good, control is better.” If you don’t believe that then you need to spend some more time on the playground or at work when the corner office comes open.

Our desire for control is at the root of our sin. Adam and Eve wanted control, and that is what the serpent offered to them. How ironic then that this sin manifests itself with our desire to support God. The animosity that Saul feels for the followers of Jesus is grounded in Saul's hunger to protect God. Saul, and the other Pharisees, sees their role as keeping God safe. They are so zealous to do so that they fail to see the presence of God in their midst. They are blind to who God is and what he may be doing.

And so, on his way to stop the followers of the Way (the earliest name for the Jesus followers); Saul is literally struck blind so that Jesus can confront the spiritual blindness that has Saul persecuting Jesus. Here, instead of the followers of God protecting God, God protects his followers. Jesus sees us as so linked to him (we are the Body of Christ) that he says that Saul's persecution of Christians is in reality a persecution of Jesus himself.

At this point in the story, if it was our first exposure to it, we would not be surprised that Jesus knocks Saul down, or that he blinds him. It fulfills our sense of Justice – you hurt my friends and I will hurt you. But Jesus has a different intent for Saul and that is that Saul will become the Lord's instrument, or vessel. What does this say about the mercy and the vision of Jesus? To take the enemy and to turn him into an apostle; what power Jesus has, what security in whom he is!

We are to have that same sense of security; not in ourselves but through Jesus. Ananias serves here as our example. Jesus appears to him in a vision and asks him to go and visit Saul and to heal him. Ananias is wonderfully skeptical about this. In essence he says, "Umm, Lord, really? Saul? Do you not know

that he is the enemy?" When the Lord says to him "Go," Ananias trusts Jesus so much that instead of continuing to view Saul as the enemy he, upon meeting Saul for the first time, calls him "Brother Saul." What wonderful faith and what a great example Ananias provides for us.

This story is such a critical example of what we are talking about in this sermon series. This is the reorientation that happens through Jesus. In every encounter with Jesus, we are being reoriented. Like Saul, we are being reoriented back to Jesus, and like Ananias we are being reoriented in our thinking about enemies and brothers and sisters.

When Jesus comes crashing into our lives, our control is taken away – hallelujah! Jesus is strong enough that we do not have to defend him; we only need to witness to his power. He is so strong that he will turn our lives around. As he turns your life around, the question this morning is who is your enemy? And, in the light of Christ, is she or he really your enemy? Or is your enemy someone whom the Lord is calling to you this day to minister? Do the scales need to fall from your eyes? Have you seen the light of Christ? Are you his instrument?