

March 4, 2018

*"The Damascus Road Experience"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Acts 7:58-8:3; 9:1-5

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Yes, St. Paul, was once, a very bad man.

He was a Pharisee who hated the early Christian converts, those followers and disciples of Jesus Christ. And he did all he could do to wreck havoc among them and to persecute them. He did his job so well that Christians feared the name, Saul of Tarsus. Reportedly, he had a fierce temper and was merciless. He would literally drag believers out of their worship and prayer meetings and cast them into prison. The very first known Christian martyr was the man we heard about in today's scripture, Stephen. It was about one year after Christ's death, and Stephen openly proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. He was arrested and tried by the same Jewish leaders that condemned Jesus. So, as you can imagine, they sentenced him to death – by stoning. And right there, at that first execution, in the middle of it all, was Saul. But the death of Stephen did not frighten Christian believers. In fact, it seemed to only make them stronger, more committed, with an even greater resolve. But Saul too, was unwavering and he was not going to be deterred in his mission to stop the spread of Christianity. So he set off to Damascus, about 150 miles from Jerusalem, to arrest those preaching Christ in the synagogues of that city.

And it was on the way there, that Saul experienced his epiphany. In his own personal testimony, he tells how he met Jesus Christ. "About noon, as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you?' I asked. 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' came the reply. Now my companions who were with me heard the voice, but did not see who was speaking to me. 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. 'Get up,' Jesus said, 'And go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' So my companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me." Now for three days Saul was without sight, and he did not eat or drink at all during that period. And you can just imagine how blindness and fasting might cause a person to do some serious reflection and soul searching. And after three days, Saul was converted, baptized and immediately went out and preached the good news of Jesus Christ, saying, "He is the Son of God." And from that day forward, the old Saul became the transformed Paul. The man who was once a great sinner became one of Christ's greatest disciples, as he traveled and preached and spread Christ's message of love throughout the known world.

Now, when it comes to the matter of those who perpetrate evil versus those who do good, I'm still trying to wrap my head around the Parkland, Florida shooting. That photograph you see on the screen was given to me by one of our new congregants, David Crooks. A friend of his lost his daughter in the tragedy, and Dave went to Florida to pay his respects, and took that picture. And I imagine the questions we immediately asked ourselves in the wake of the shooting were what would drive a young man like Nikolas Cruz to carry out such a horrific act, and how can we as a society prevent something like this from happening again in the future. Since then, it seems like everyone has their opinion, from banning guns entirely, to arming teachers in the schools. But I think, after seriously evaluating the pros and cons, these options would only prove to be inadequate solutions that don't address the underlying problem. Because you see, the killing of seventeen people in Parkland, is just one example of a much greater problem that permeates our society. A problem that exhibits itself today in more than just the violence we see in mass shootings. We see it in the racism that still exists in our country today. We see it in gang affiliations and the thousands of lives lost in the inner cities every year. We see it in the drug epidemic that takes over sixty thousand lives a year. We see it the continuing cycle of poverty. We see it in things like road rage, and other anti-social behavior. And really, it all comes down to this... how a person feels about him or herself. And too many people today feel a lack of self worth and self respect. So many people just don't, or can't, love themselves. And psychologists have shown that people with low self-esteem are very often withdrawn, insecure, angry, unmotivated, easily depressed and driven to "act out" in one way or another. And when I try to put myself in that person's shoes, I think that must be what hell is like. Not fire and brimstone and eternal torment, but the hell of what a person is feeling inside themselves – the emptiness, the loneliness, the hopelessness, and believing they are worthless. And when they feel that way, it numbs them to the world around them, and becomes a barrier to the one thing that can change their lives. And that is God!

Now I'm not a psychologist, or a policy maker, and I can't change the laws or affect the nation as a whole. But, I am a pastor and I know God. And I know that when God's power enters into us, it can transform us, just like it did St. Paul. God can heal us, restore us and instill in us a love – for God, for ourselves, and for one another. It's too bad Nickolas Cruz didn't know, or feel, that love.

Now, to a lesser degree, I'm thinking that some of us here today might not be feeling God's love as we struggle with some issue in our lives. Not on the scale of those things I previously described, but still things that weigh down our souls. Perhaps they are misplaced priorities, confusion, guilt, despair, or even sin. We've made wrong decisions, we've caused someone hurt or sorrow, we've continued in our

bad habits. And these things, too, becomes a barrier in our relationship with God. And perhaps we've become discouraged by our inability to change, and we stay mired in the muck of our lives. But like I said last week, God has a peculiar liking for sinners and those of us who miss the mark. He takes sinners, uses them, and turns them into disciples. Like Saul. Or like David – who committed adultery with Bathsheba then had her husband killed, yet God made him a great ruler of Israel. Like Moses – who murdered a man and tried to cover it up, yet God made him the exalted leader of the Israelites. Like Noah – a drunk, who God used to build the ark and save humankind. Like the woman at the well, who was living in sin, but Jesus changed her through his gift of living water, and she ran back to her village telling everyone his story. Like the criminal on the cross next to Jesus when he was crucified, who God used to show it's never too late to repent and enter the kingdom of heaven. And yes, even like you and me. That's why the scripture reading today is so relevant. Paul's story shows that none of us are beyond changing, none of us are beyond forgiveness, none of us beyond redemption.

Eugene Peterson, author of "The Message Bible," writes about how the story of Paul's Damascus Road conversion is one of the great testimonials to the power of God to change people. He writes, "This man, Paul, was an enemy and a sinner, the one individual on whom the entire church had given up, the man from whom the early Christians expected the worst. And this is the very same man of whom God said, 'He is a chosen instrument of mine.'" Peterson goes on to say, "It is precisely at this point that I become personally involved in the story. For it is no longer for me a story about a conversion that happened to someone a long time ago. It is rather, a revelation of what God (can do for any one of us who think we are) beyond reach."

Now I don't know for sure, but I would guess that Nickolas Cruz looked in the mirror every day and saw only his ugly self. Saw a person that the world looked at as an enemy and a sinner, a person from whom others only expected the worst. And because of that, he became the person that others saw and expected of him as he traveled down his Damascus Road. But I also wonder if any modern day disciple ever took the time to tell him that God loved him. That having God in his life could change him. Maybe, if they had, he would have changed and things would have been different and 14 year old Gina Montalto and sixteen others would still be alive. As Adam Hamilton reminds us in our Lenten study, that is why we are to put on the flesh of Christ for the world. Because through our love, we can push back the darkness of violence, suffering, poverty and injustice while doing the good things that shine the light of God's love, compassion and mercy. Yes, we are God's best and last chance for the world. We are the only means to show God's hope and love to a world that so desperately needs it. Amen.