

One Ordinary Little Man

Acts 9:1-19a

This morning's lesson details a dramatic event etched indelibly in the Christian consciousness, the conversion of Paul. And to be clear, Paul is not the name he was given at birth. He was born Saul of Tarsus and grew up to be one of the church's first and fiercest foes.

Along the way he became a devout Pharisee in First Century Judaism. He was convinced that Christians were a dangerous fringe movement in Judaism, that they would irreplaceably damage Judaism with their dangerous and insane claim that Jesus was the Messiah. And so **Saul persecuted Christians**. Ferociously and without abandon.

In our lesson this morning, Saul was on his way to Damascus with official letters from the authorities giving him power to seek out and destroy any and all Christian groups he could uncover. And on his way there was a light, and a voice which said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

He fell to the ground blinded by the light and terrified to hear the voice of Christ.

Stunned and blinded, he was led around by hand, too shocked to eat or drink. There's a pattern in Saul's conversion that is seen in other dramatic religious conversions where someone is moved from one way of being to another, radically transformed forever.

That radical transformation is signified by a light, a blindness, and a move from Saul the resourceful persecutor of the church to a rather helpless Paul being led around by hand, totally dependent upon others.

And **in the middle of this dramatic, traumatic story of change, a little man appears, easily and usually overlooked when you study the story of Paul's conversion**. His name was Ananias.

You see, as Paul is being led around by the hand by his companions, who can't imagine what in the world has happened to him; while Paul can't eat or drink or find his way around, the voice of God also comes to Ananias and says, "Ananias, arise and go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. Go welcome him into the faith because I have plans for him. I have chosen him to be my missionary to all the Gentiles."

Ananias can hardly believe what he hears. "Lord, did you say *Saul*? Is this the same Saul that is church enemy number one, the persecutor and destroyer of so many Christians?" And the voice replies, "Go!"

And Ananias goes. He goes straight to Straight Street in Damascus, and there, just as the voice said, he finds Saul. Ananias goes to him and addresses him not as church enemy number one, not as the murderer and destroyer that he is, but Ananias addresses him as "Brother, Saul."

Ananias laid hands on him. Ananias thus becomes a minister, a priest to Saul, and when he lays hands upon Saul's head, immediately Saul's sight is restored and he is able to receive food.

The change has been so dramatic that he is no longer called Saul, but gets a new name, representative of his new identity. He will now be known as Paul.

Many wonder how Ananias must have received all of this. And we'll never know because Ananias is never heard from again. Most believe he went back home and went about his business, having played his bit part in this great drama of Christian conversion. Yet without his willing assistance, Paul might have never been converted.

What if Ananias had said, "Lord, I don't mind a little evangelism, I don't mind some new people joining our church. I don't even mind someone sitting in my pew now and again. But a murderer? I'm not going to wander down Straight Street and risk death on the basis of some guy's 'religious experience.'"

And who would have blamed Ananias. Maybe he had friends, close family members, who had been in prison and put to death through the efforts of Saul. Ananias may not have wished Paul any harm, but he also didn't wish him any good.

It's enough to wonder who had the more dramatic conversion in this story. Was it Saul, converted from being church enemy number one to the great heroic missionary of the gentiles, or was it Ananias who, on the basis of nothing more than a voice and a vision, risked life, limb, and liberty to go to a street called Straight, address this once bitter enemy of the church as, "Brother," touch him, lay hands on him, and fade away into the distance after one of the most dramatic transformations in all of scripture.

When we are converted to Christ, we are not simply converted into loving Christ, but - in loving Christ, we are commanded to love those whom Christ loves. His love is always reaching out, grasping hold of lives, changing others, finding the lost coin, bringing lost sheep in the fold. And if you are already in the fold, how does it feel when some of these lost sheep get found?

It's one thing to love Jesus, it's an entirely different thing and an even greater challenge to love those whom Jesus loves that you find hard to be around! Ananias had heard enough about Saul to know that he didn't want any part of him. And yet, commanded to go to his house and bless him, commanded to call him "brother", he went and embraced him.

Maybe that's the acid test for whether or not your conversion is real, for whether or not our faith walk is truly in the name of Christ. Are you able to call "brother," or "sister," those whom Jesus so named that we have a hard time dealing with?

Ananias is not, for all we know, some spectacular Christian. We never hear him teach or preach. His name is not mentioned among those who are closest to Jesus either before or after his Resurrection. Ananias is just one ordinary little man who says little but shows us so much.

Perhaps we're meant to learn that Jesus does not hesitate to ask ordinary, little people to act like Christians. Perhaps we're supposed to see that true discipleship is when ordinary, everyday people relate to others the same way Jesus relates to us.

Perhaps we're to understand that Christians are simply ordinary people who live counter to the ways of the world and are called to refer to others, not by the world's designations of politically incorrect slanders, but as Ananias called Paul, as "brother" or "sister" in Christ.