

Easter 3C – Paul’s Conversion – and Ours

Acts 9:1-20

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Many years ago I was in a class at the church I was attending at the time, and it was getting on towards Good Friday. The instructor asked us to do a little role playing, asking us to assume the role of someone in the scenes immediately leading up to Jesus’ trial. No one, as I recall, wanted to assume the role of Jesus himself, or, not surprisingly, Judas or Pilate. Most wanted to be one of the disciples, or Mary Magdalene – one of the, at least, pretty, good guys. But – and I don’t really know why – the name that popped into my mind was Ananias, the Jewish leader who asserted that it was better that one man should die than that the whole of the Jewish people should suffer. As we look back, we usually contrast his position with the fact that the one he is condemning to death is the very Son of God – as the Nicene Creed puts it, “True God of True God.” He didn’t know that at the time, of course. In fact, the creed wasn’t written until centuries later, after many debates about exactly what Jesus’ status actually was. So think of the situation that confronted the Jewish leaders in the Jerusalem of the day. Isn’t there a case to be made for Ananias’s logic? Isn’t he a man who is merely articulating a view consistent with his designated role as leader of the people?

Ironically, I think the year we did that exercise was same year that I saw perhaps the greatest of Meryl Streep’s incredible string of incredibly good movies, *Sophie’s Choice*. You may remember the crucial scene, a scene that lays the foundation for the mental anguish that tortured her character for the rest of her life. Although not Jewish, Sophie is about to be sent off to a concentration camp with her two children, when a particularly sadistic Nazi officer gives her a choice, give up one of her two gorgeous children to be raised by a German family, the other to die by gas, or both will be killed. Which one is she to save? Which one to allow to die? As it happens, of course, the one she gave up to be saved did, in fact, die also, though much more slowly, but, again, just as in the case of Ananias, the future was unknown to Sophie. Her choice was what was presented to her – no more, no less.

Neither Ananias’s nor Sophie’s is a choice that I’d ever want to be in a position to have to make. But neither decision was, it seems to me, a sinful one. However ugly a choice each made, it was dictated by the circumstances and what each knew at the time.

Now, let’s look instead at the story of what happens to Paul, still called by his Hebrew name, Saul, as he travels the road to Damascus, where he intends to find followers of Jesus, to arrest them and return them to Jerusalem, presumably to be stoned as heretics. Indeed, the very first sentence of our reading this morning from the Book of Acts has him “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”

Looking at Paul's behavior from the perspective of those who followed Jesus' teachings, let us hear the words of another Ananias, clearly not the one who preferred Jesus' death to the suffering of the Jewish people as a whole. This Ananias, himself a disciple, receives a vision from Christ, in which he is told that he is to go to the house of a man called Judas – again, clearly not the Judas we know so well for having betrayed Jesus – to lay his hands upon Saul of Tarsus so that he might regain the sight he lost when struck down by his own vision of the Lord. Ananias responds that he has heard that Saul has done much evil “to your saints in Jerusalem.” From Paul's perspective, though, what he had been doing was not persecuting Christians but stopping a Jewish heresy. We live in a multi-cultural society – in which there would really be very little difference between punishing heretics and persecuting those who have different beliefs, even though, of course, there actually are countries, even today, in which such persecution does in fact occur.

There is a very great difference, however, between our aversion today towards persecuting adherents of other religions and the situation in Paul's world. There really were only different sects of Jews, each of which believed it represented the purest form of Judaism – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Then along came Christianity to challenge even those others. Even within Christianity, as it grew and spread, there were battles among various interpretations of the story of Jesus. Let's face it, there have been many people killed through the centuries because of their differing beliefs – including within Christianity itself – wars even, to say very little about the Inquisition and other examples of true persecutions. Second, and really important for our purposes, this story is not primarily about the persecution of heretics – that's just its setting – but about Saul's conversion and the introduction to his coming career as disciple to the gentiles. Whether you want to characterize his activities vis-à-vis the earliest Christians in Jerusalem as evil, or even sinful, really is irrelevant to the use God can make of him – or of any of us – despite his or our previous behavior.

One of the most powerful incentives for my own growing orthodoxy – which led me back to the Episcopal Church after years in, to begin with at least, Unitarianism – is my recognition, despite my reluctance to admit it, that human beings are inherently imperfect, subject to what may well be called sinful behavior – sinful in the literal sense of falling short of the mark. Wherever we turn, we can see folks who fail to live up to standards we believe God calls them to live up to. We don't have to invoke the name of a Bernard Madoff to see how people can stray off the path of morality. All of us, at one time or another, have wandered off that path.

But, just as Paul's conversion made him one of the most influential – if often misunderstood – figures in the history of the western world, there are plenty of examples of behavior that can only be characterized as guided by God's own hand. However you characterize the behavior and decisions of either Ananias, or of Sophie, or, for that matter, of Saul of Tarsus, they are ultimately just like all of us. And, like Saul, God can make use of us as well. We all fall short of the mark God has

set for us – that is, to be perfect even as our father in heaven is perfect. But we also can accomplish much – with, as our baptismal vows put it, God’s help. It’s helpful to remember that our behavior is subject to the pulls of both good and bad. God’s grace is there for us, if we will but avail ourselves of it.

Before Ann and I were married and moved to the Northwest Corner, I visited her in Massachusetts. She drove me to Boston, which I hadn’t visited since I was in my early 20s. You all probably realize that driving in that city can be a bit of a challenge. Everyone races for the first spot at lights; everyone jockeys for the few available parking spaces. To put it in really broad terms, it’s each person for him or herself. Now Ann had lived in Massachusetts for some years and was used to the problems presented by driving in Boston. So I discovered that my sweet wife, normally a real pussycat behind the wheel, blended in just perfectly with the other Boston drivers. As a consequence, at almost every intersection I got more and more agitated. “Jesus Christ!” “Jesus Christ!” I muttered. Ann turned to me finally, and said, “ But you’re a priest. I didn’t know you swore like that.” To which I responded, “I’m not swearing; I’m praying!”

O.K., I’m not Saul of Tarsus, brought to a more religious frame of mind by God’s grace. But I am like all of you. With God’s help we can all respond to any event in our lives in ways more Christian, more loving towards others. We may never become a saint like Paul, but remember that, just as the second Ananias did in this story from Acts, Paul himself constantly refers to all good followers of the Lord as “saints.” So maybe, if only we listen for God’s promptings, we can, at least in a minor way, become more saint-like ourselves. AMEN