

“Ananias and the Great Reversal”

Acts 9:1-19

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Each year at UBC, we have a theme for our worship year. We’ve done series on subversive spirituality, Rivers of paradise, Imagine That, Whose Gospel is it anyway? We even did a series called P’s on earth where each service started with the letter P. Think Peace, poverty, prophecy, Paul, passion, Podemos, and so on. Last year we did a series on Reversals. This year, we’ve looked at stories of faith. So, today, since the Lectionary gives us such a great set of texts, I’m gonna do a mash-up of the Reversals and the stories of our faith. Maybe as we look at this familiar story, we can imagine our own story and how we might need to reverse course.

There are four over-arching themes in the Gospel. You have heard about the Great Commission: go ye into all the world and preach my Gospel to every creature. You know about the Great Commandment: Love God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as you love yourself. That’s actually 2 great commandments but who’s counting. You know the Great Criteria: When did I see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison or without a home? And Jesus responds that whenever we have done it to the least of these then you have done it unto me. But today we have the Great Reversal. And it centers around Ananias.

In this time of national and international tension, we wish for our leaders to be reversed. We wish for them to make the right decisions. We expect them to act like adults, instead of throwing tantrums and calling each other names. But the Great Reversal is not about them. It’s about us.

The story of Ananias

So there I was, minding my own business. Actually, I was minding my business and minding the business of the local Christian community. Such is the task of a follower of the Way. You are responsible for yourself and the community at large. I was doing everything expected of me. More than most even. So why did God choose me to do even more? I mean, what about the others who are not pulling their weight? How about some divinely inspired responsibility equity, huh?

Anyway, the voice told me to go downtown to Straight Street. Where I’m to find a new recruit. I’m supposed to take him home to my house and teach him all there is to know about the Way. The problem? Well, the guy I’m supposed to recruit is Christian enemy number one. Saul. Arrogant, self-aggrandizing Saul. You know, the one who calls himself a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee. He watched over the stoning of the great preacher Stephen. Last I heard he was on his way here to Damascus to round up the followers of the Way and take us back to Jerusalem. To be stoned, probably or thrown into the arena for the amusement of the Roman occupiers. He’s now supposed to be a convert. And I’m supposed to sell his conversion to the church community. Do you think I’ll have any credibility after this? Why should I trust Saul? Better yet, why should I trust you, God? Don’t you know what they’ll do to me, what they’ll say about me? Can’t you have someone else do it?

I know, I know, “thou preparest a table in the presence of mine enemies”. But could you pick a less lethal enemy? I’m not sure this is what I signed up for. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Stop proof-texting me and let me rant.

So, I went to see him and he couldn’t see me. He had this blank expression. I waved my hands in front of his eyes and he didn’t blink. I looked closer and I could see tears in his eyes. I hadn’t expected that. I expected rage, trickery, I expected to see blood in his eyes. It reminded me of myself when I first encountered the risen Christ. It was like looking in a mirror. So this was God’s plan. I needed to see my enemy as a human being, a broken human being who needed me.

I walked up to him and said, “Brother Saul?” He blinked, looked at me. I found his tears were contagious. Before I knew it, we were on our way to my house. What would my family say? One way or the other, I will not be known by my town in the same way. Thanks a lot God, I think. What do Pharisees eat, anyway?

The scales came off of Saul’s eyes, not when he met Jesus. The scales fell off of Saul’s eyes when Ananias called him brother. That’s the great reversal. Loving enemies is not about changing them. It’s about changing you. It doesn’t mean don’t hold them accountable. It does mean don’t write them off. It means don’t call them animals.

“Thou preparest a table in the presence of mine enemies,” says the 23rd. Psalm. We dust that scripture off at funerals and times of crisis, but then we forget about it. Kinda like we forget about Jesus’ admonition that we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Even the apostle Paul, long after he changed his name from Saul would say: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.” (Romans 12:20a)

The new world that the Christian community was trying to create was one where reconciliation reigned instead of terror. It was one in which people would want to live and thrive. How do we build that kind of community?

The book of Acts recounts the stumbles on the way to grow an unwieldy movement that was attracting people that were sworn enemies of one another.

And it is with this context that we encounter Saul and Ananias, two leaders who were enemies. It’s the pivotal point of the book of Acts. Reza Aslan calls the Acts of the Apostles a love story for Paul. Saul was a baby Christian and needed someone to learn-him-up in the ways of Christ.

In order for Paul to begin his work, the former Saul needed to not only be converted by the power of the Holy Spirit. He also need to be befriended by Ananias. His conversion calls not just for Saul’s encounter with Jesus, but the community’s change of heart. I’m sure it wasn’t easy, let alone an easy sell to the church. That’s why Ananias was so vital to the early church.

In today’s scripture, Saul isn’t just a traveler on the road. He’s a persecutor of the Christians. He’s perhaps a bit paranoid and a bit Machiavellian, like an ancient ICE agent. He’s looking for people who are Christians so he can prosecute and persecute them. We know what happens. He has an encounter with Jesus, is blinded by the light and is directed to make a change in his life.

But that’s only half of the story. The other half is Ananias—one of the Christian targets of Saul’s pogrom. Ananias also has an encounter with God who asks him to do something much more difficult than Jesus had Saul do. Saul had to change his ways and become a Christian.

Saul was a leader and would simply change his leadership tactics. He could use his oratory skills to convert people to his way of thinking.

Ananias, on the other hand had to befriend Saul. He had to trust someone that had persecuted him and his family. He had to put into practice Jesus' words to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus, can't we just admire you from afar? It's too hard to actually follow you. Now you want me to prepare a table for my enemy?

Imagine your deepest enemy, your persecutor. Imagine the person who wants your job; who wants to come after your family; who wants to fight against you. Imagine a bully who actually exacts the death penalty. This is who Saul was to the early believers in Jesus, the followers of the Way. God chose this Saul to lead the transformation of the disparate people of the Way into the transforming church of Jesus Christ.

But first, Saul gets accosted by Jesus. He is told to give up his persecuting ways. This is an identity crisis for Saul. Who was he if he was not a persecutor? He had such zeal for his faith that he pursued Christians. He might have even gotten a bit of pleasure from his persecuting. It can feel good to be better than another. To put them in their place. All felt right with the world. Until it didn't.

And so Saul was blinded by the light. He was told to wait until someone else would help him regain his sight. So Saul needed to stay there, patiently for three days. That time frame is no accident. It took three days for Jesus to rise from the dead. Paul needed to be patient. I'm not sure that was a gift he had. Patience. What's that prayer? "God grant me patience and give it to me NOW!"

But he had no choice. He had to wait for someone to open his eyes. And who would open his eyes but good old Ananias. I can just imagine the protests. The Scriptures give us the highlights, but I imagine the tirades of Ananias. "I'll call anyone brother. Anyone but Saul. I would not, I could not trust him in a box, with a fox, on a train, in the rain, I would not could not trust him here or there, I will not trust him anywhere."

Ananias needed to leave behind his judgment of Saul.

Imagine an African American in Falcon Heights, trusting a white police officer.

Imagine a Palestinian in Gaza trusting an Israeli soldier.

Imagine an abuse victim trusting an abuser.

Imagine the reddest ditto-head and the bluest snowflake calling each other sister or brother.

It's almost too hard to imagine.

Like the Centurion who said at Jesus' crucifixion, "Truly this man was the son of God."

Imagine if we spent as much time and energy on peace that we do on war.

Imagine saying brother Donald, sister Kelly-Ann, Brother William, Sister Sarah. The great reversal is not changing your enemies, but to not eat of the low-hanging fruit of insult and hatred. They may not change, but it is not about them. It is about us.

We can wait around forever for our enemies to seek reconciliation with us. We deserve it, after all. And when they don't, we are righteously frustrated. The real reversal, the only one that we can control is the offering we give to our enemies. It's not their work. It's our work. It's about where we put our best energy.

The true conversion in this story is of Ananias. God told him to use his best energy not hating his persecutor, but imagining his persecutor transformed—and to trust God that the transformation has already happened. We don't get that opportunity much, but we do have a choice of where we spend our energy. Ananias had expended a lot of energy hating Saul and for

good reason. But God gave him an opportunity to transform the use of his energy. Use all of that passion to imagine the possibility of peace. Ananias had his life hijacked and helped Saul the persecutor become Paul the apostle to the gentiles.

Ananias, perhaps reluctantly, took a hold of Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” I can just see the cringing of Ananias, wondering if it were true; wondering if he had been duped, praying that he had not put his family in danger. And the scales fell off Saul’s eyes. Actually they fell off both of their eyes. For they saw each other as brothers.

Hear this, in God’s plan, we are to have the courage to befriend an enemy. It was one thing to hear “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” It’s totally another to embrace your former enemies with kinship ties.

Saul, Ananias and the church spent three years together before they let Saul go on his way to spread the message to the wider Christian churches.

Maybe Ananias needed to learn that the enemy was not Saul, but a system that devalues people so much that we seek to turn them into black and white categories of good guys and bad guys. People to trust and people to distrust. Friends and enemies. Fight that system, says God and you’ll be truly worthy to be a follower of the Way. In fact, you’ll be a leader of the Way. It will take courage, because most people won’t trust you because you hang out with an untrustworthy sort.

There’s a story from the early days of the Nicaraguan Revolution. In 1979, former members of the National Guard, trained in the US, were imprisoned for their brutal treatment of their countrymen and women under the dictator Somoza. Sandinista general Tomas Borge met his former tormentor on the other side of the bars. It is said that he looked his former captor in the eyes and said, “For all of the evil you have done, I sentence you to a life of forgiveness.” And he set his former captor free. In the process, he set himself free too.

The real work of the church is to say that this kind of us versus them mentality has destroyed our best communities and has left the earth scorched. There has to be a better way. And the church of Jesus Christ which tries to practice loving enemies is the better way. It takes courage and it is so worth it.

Maybe it starts with not believing the one dimensional things the media says about your opponent.

Maybe it starts with the courage not just to embrace an enemy, but to see them as a broken and flawed human being, just like us.

Maybe it starts with me.

One of the great legacy of Al Franken was the tradition of a bipartisan Minnesota Hot Dish Bake-Off. The 8 Representatives and 2 Senators gather to share a meal and celebrate what we hold in common, a love for diverse and creative casseroles.

The gospel, my friends is a book of reversals. Rather than accepting the status quo, this book upends it and us with it. It rocks us out of our complacency. It tells us to continually reverse course when we have embraced too easily the way of the world that puts us into good guy and bad guy camps. We are called to be better than that, bolder, brighter, braver.

May we, like Ananias face the inner judger and get better.

That’s the Great Reversal.