

JUNE 23, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

June 16 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains : second Saul’ Acts 9:1-24

This week in our Heroes and Villains series we are looking at a different Saul than last week. It’s good to put these two stacked on one another. Saul last week is the tragic example of someone who rejects the transformation offered. Saul this week is an example of the wonderful outcome of someone who embraces transformation. He’s also someone who was both hero and villain. And that through his adult life depending on one’s vantage point.

The Saul this week is more widely known as Paul. But before he was Paul he was Saul. What we know if Saul is that he was raised to be a devout, passionate, faithful, and observant Jew. He was highly educated. He was an expert in the Law and in scripture. He was skilled in arguing scripture. He was also a Pharisee, perhaps even a Pharisee amongst Pharisees. He was devoted to his faith and his people.

When we’re introduced to him in Acts 8 he is not a fan of the Christians. At this point they weren’t even referred to as Christians. They were The Way. To the Romans they were just a sect in the Jewish community. Keep in mind at this point that every Christian was also a Jew. Peter hadn’t had his vision yet from God that invited Gentiles into the redemptive work of Christ. They were just an offshoot of the Jews. And Saul doesn’t like them...

When Stephen proclaims his faith before a gathering of Jews and Jewish leaders he is stoned to death. Scripture says he fell at the feet of an approving man named Saul. In chapter 9 Saul is getting authority to round up believers in Jesus and jailing them. I think we can presume with security that as this happened if a few were executed or killed Saul wouldn’t have minded. We know he has a reputation because later when Ananias is told he must heal Saul the response is disbelief. “Why should I heal this guy? All he’s done is hound us and harm us!”

Before we get to Saul’s conversion let’s take a moment to speculate about why he would have been so passionate to stamp out these Christians. He was educated and he loved his people. He knew intimately the stories of Israel being taken into captivity. Israel had split into two kingdoms, the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah. The kingdom of Israel was taken by the Assyrians. Some time later Judah was taken by the Babylonians. The reason we hear the phrase “the lost tribes of Israel” is because the Assyrians never gave the option to the kingdom of Israel to return to their homeland. They were scattered. On the other hand the kingdom of Judah, which was just the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were allowed to return. Ezra and Nehemiah tell this tale in scripture.

What matters is that the same reason was at the root of their captivity. They were unfaithful to God and turned towards idols. Then their behavior suffered as well. Captivity was the consequence. From what I’ve read and learned archaeology demonstrates that pre-exile many if not most homes had idols in them. Post exile they disappear. Israel has learned her lesson. For Paul what he is witnessing is a full scale temptation back into idolatry. To him Jesus is just a man, not Messiah. For Jews to be leading Jews to worship this man as divine is nothing less than heretic idolatry. He knows the dire consequences that come from this kind of behavior. Of course he’s going to try and stamp it out!!!

So this is how deeply committed Saul is to eradicating this new movement.

Then as he’s headed off to carry out his marching orders he’s struck blind. Three days later he is healed. In the interim Saul hears Jesus’ voice asking him “why are you persecuting me?” In this time, and as he is healed his heart changes. We are told that his physical blindness was healed as “something like scales fell from his eyes.”

Here his role switches. Up to this point Saul is a hero to the Jews and a villain to the Christians. When he converts he become a villain to the Jews and hero to Christians.

After Saul is healed he changes his name to Paul. He also has an immense change of heart. He goes from Saul the persecutor to Paul the preacher. He quickly jumps into ministry. He doesn’t need instruction in the scriptures or the Law. He has them down. It’s just that in receiving Jesus as the

Messiah his interpretation of the scriptures has changed. This understanding drives him to want to bring the message to whomever God leads him to bring it.

What we know is that Paul then goes on to establish many new churches. One of the things that we miss because Paul became such a powerful apostle is that he didn't start out fully that way. Paul and Barnabas are mentioned together often. Barnabas was actually a sort of coach to Paul as he began his ministry. Later they parted ways over a disagreement and the scripture follows Paul thereafter.

Paul goes on not only to form churches, but to be a living witness to what a sacrificial life and love look like. He is beaten, left for dead, and jailed for his ministry. None of it affects his resolve. He carries on. He returns to encourage and foster churches he's started. A large portion of the New Testament is Paul writing to instruct and encourage churches as they struggle to exist in a hostile and tempting environment. The people who once hailed him as hero are calling for his death. Nevertheless Paul moves on in faith. Truly heroic action.

The first lesson we can learn from Saul's story to becoming Paul is apparent. This may be the biggest 180 degree turn in history. Whatever situations we are dealing with that are counter to God's desire we can be transformed. I don't know many of us sitting in a pew that are actively trying to jail Christians. Yet we all have those places where what we believe isn't quite aligned with God. If God can transform Saul to Paul, God can transform any of us.

The second lesson is humility. We'll unpack this soon, but people of faith are often incredibly certain of things that they are wrong about. Native Americans were slaughtered and defrauded because God fearing people believed the New World was the new Promised Land given to the immigrating Christians. Slaves were mistreated due to a bad interpretation of scripture. Women were considered property because of how people construed scripture. We need to be cautious about who we exclude. We need to be open to being shown to be in error so that we can right our perspective and right our lives.

The third lesson really comes from the conversion experience of Paul. Luke is understood to have written Acts. I offer that his telling of Saul's conversion to Paul was intentionally written to mirror Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus died and was risen on the third day in power and glory. He spent three days in the darkness of the tomb. Saul was struck blind and spent three days in the darkness of his blindness. He was resurrected to wholeness and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And while he wasn't raised in glory he was raised to glorify.

The image of scales falling from his eyes is important. I suggest that Luke is not just referring to "physical scales" but also spiritual. Paul had been spiritually blind to the scriptures he knew so well. It wasn't until he saw Jesus as Messiah that those scales were lifted and he interpreted the scriptures rightly.

Why was he blind? Because of other people's ideas. Paul had been raised to believe what he believed because of what other people told him. He was trained to understand scripture a certain way. He was told to read scripture a certain way. He was told what scripture meant a certain way. And of course like anyone brought up from a young age he believed it. But they were wrong.

These were the scales that fell from his spiritual eyes. He was blinded by centuries of understanding about the Messiah that he'd been told he had to believe in order to be a good Jew. He'd bought this to the point that he was good with jailing and killing people who disagreed. But when he realized his error he embraced it with the same passion he had in pursuing his former belief. Paul's eyes were opened. He bucked centuries of belief as a result. He changed his world and ours. What could we do if we had Paul's courage to face our assumptions, alter them in light of God's grace, and minister in a new way?

Paul's issue was the same as the one the hems up many Christians today. He was tied to what other people others told him scripture says. He was tied to it to the place he was driven to approving murder and looking to jail people. He wasn't interpreting scripture in it's own light. He was interpreting with the scales of others' eyes.

So here is the third lesson. What happens when we allow the scales to drop off our eyes? What are we mistaking in our own interpretation that might pave the way for others to enter our space and congregation? Who are we excluding from redemption because of our own misunderstandings?

Saul's transition to Paul is the epitome of grace. He understood not everyone grasped what he came to know. He loved them anyway.

This is critical today. Do we believe because someone told us? Do we read because someone told us to read is some way? Or do we believe what we believe because it is correct?

If we want to attract people who don't yet believe in Christ this is incredibly pertinent. Folks who don't believe often do so because there are aspects of what we say that don't line up with what we do in practice or don't line up with the Jesus of the gospels.

This isn't to say we toss everything that we know. Of course much of what we've been taught is correct. It's the parts that are mistaken that get in the way. One of the simplest examples is being told that we have to read everything literally. Scripture says that God "knit us together in our mother's womb". Yet none of us are made of yarn nor do we believe God sat there with knitting needles. Scripture says that if we have faith even as little as a grain of mustard seed can say to a mountain be removed and cast into the sea and it will be so. Most believers have more faith than this yet we don't practically believe we're going to uproot geography with a word. It doesn't mean we don't believe the Bible, just that we have the good sense to interpret both faithfully and with discernment.

The key for Saul was recognizing Jesus as Messiah. Once he did this it opened up his interpretation. Cutting loose other people's ideas was the gateway to truth. It was also the gateway to freedom and love. Saul lived in hate, malice, and judgment over Christians. No matter how you slice it that is a spirit that is miserable. His transformation to Paul replaced that negativity with love, grace, and mercy. The one who was persecuting was willing to be persecuted even to death for his newfound faith. His resolve never failed. And saying "I am content in whatever situation I find myself" lets us know he found peace.

Wherever you find yourself, whatever needs to change in heart and mind it can be done. With the help of God all of us can transform.

Be humble. Trust that all of us are wrong about something and be willing to have it pointed out so it can change.

Allow that some of our interpretations are misinformed. Often the ones that cause the most strife and internal problems are in this category. So be willing to set aside other people's ideas that might not actually be derived from genuine scriptural interpretation. Like Paul this may be the path to peace of heart and mind. It may be the key to delivering the gospel message more powerfully to transform not only ourselves but also the world.