

Sermon Text – Sunday, May 1, 2022 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**First Reading: Revelation 5:11-14, Second Reading: John 21: 10-19,
Responsive reading for message: Acts 9:1-20 – A Changed Life.**

Everyone has had a time in their lives where they reached a dramatic or startling turning point. Whether that was a turning from the single-life to a married life, or making a drastic career change, or making that hard decision to sell a business. Of course, for those decisions or turning points we do not focus on the divine, but maybe they started with a divine spark. When we read these sections of scripture, we are probably more focused on turning points that lead us to follow Christ. Sometimes our turning points come upon us gradually and the change is natural and expected. Some turning points, however, are more drastic – mine was in a remote campground on the Kentucky-Tennessee border around midnight on a Labor Day Holiday when I realized I had no other support than God so on my knees I prayed. The scriptures read this morning remind us of the power of God's glory acting to change lives. We see that in Saul's experience on the road to Damascus, and we see that in Jesus' interactions with Peter at their third encounter after resurrection.

Peter stumbled and, on the night of Jesus' trial, denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus steps in and offers forgiveness in the three part asking to counter the three denials. "Yes, Jesus, you know I love you – of course I will follow you." Saul on the other hand was on a murderous path intent on destroying followers of the way but Jesus steps in and sends him to "straight" street to await further instructions. Saul had no choice but to go where Jesus sent him, he was helpless. We can say that "love stepped in and grabbed Saul's fist mid-punch, unbalancing him and his plans."

Saul was a Pharisee an educated man and a Roman Citizen. He was present at the stoning of Stephen – some say he may have helped to carry out Stephen's murder. Needless to say, he was a ruthless persecutor of the followers of Jesus and a hater of Gentiles. But Saul knew God, believed in God and felt he was doing God's work so when the voice struck him, he recognized divinity and responded with "Who are you, Lord?" I wonder what went through Saul's mind when the reply "I am Jesus" came? Do you think he knew he was in for a bit of trouble? Saul as a vicious persecutor had been a 'thorn in Jesus' flesh' and now Jesus was placing a 'thorn in Saul's flesh' to show him how much he must suffer for Jesus' sake.

Next the Lord appears to Ananias in a vision, instructing him to go to Saul and "lay hands on him" so he might regain his sight. [what some would call an ordination] We don't know much about Ananias, presumably a member of the

Christian community in Damascus he had heard of Saul's murderous intent yet was commissioned by the Lord to minister to Saul when he arrived in Damascus. Ananias put aside his fear, believing the Lord would never send him where the Lord could not save and protect him.

Maybe it was the fact that Ananias accepted Saul as a Christian brother and ministered to him without judgment or fear that contributed to Saul's conversion, baptism, and beginning his own ministry. It's important that Christians journey together, encouraging each other particularly at the beginning of our journeys. That is what Ananias did for Saul, encouraged him and nurtured his early conversion. But – Ananias was only a tool used by Christ for Saul's conversion, it was the will of God and God's plan that Saul be an instrument "chosen to bring [the Lord's] name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel."

Last week we were reminded how God can take even the worst human experiences, Jesus crucifixion scars, and use them to transform us into wholeness. Now we see how God can take even the worst humans – a murderous persecutor such as Saul of Tarsus – and transform him / her into an instrument to do God's will. Most of us do not need to be 'struck blind' before we ask God "What do you want me to do?" Saul however needed that extreme moment to 'see' the light.

This is a message to us that as much as we try to go our own way and do what we believe is the right thing to do, Jesus will make it clear to us one way or another that he is in charge. The only response anyone is capable of is, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" There is no bargaining, no negotiations, or half-way responses – "the response of the redeemed is obedience."

I cannot say that human will has no place in the work of God – but I know that if human will is not in alignment with the will of God, the human will be sent to 'straight' street to wait to be told what to do. Which is what happened to Saul.

This is a beautiful interpretation of God's power to change lives, even the lives of those who work for evil purposes. God has the power to take even the ones who never in a million years would think God could ever love or accept them – and mold them into leaders or model citizens in the kingdom of God. This is good news for some of us. Others may wonder why God did not strike Saul dead right there and put an end to the murderous persecutor once for all time. Some may think Saul got off easy – but what better example of the power of God to change lives. If God can change Saul the persecutor into Saint Paul imagine what can be done in our lives. And that begs the question, is the God we worship a God of mercy or a God of punishment?

So – what does this mean for the church today? How do we, as the body of Christ, change lives and encourage lives that are changed? How do we show the

love of God to our friends, our neighbors, those who deny us, our betrayers, our persecutors, and our worst enemies? Last week we saw that Jesus' scars were the proof of Easter truth – we must also know that our own scars are proof of changed lives and the truth of Jesus' promises.

I can only guess that there are people you know who have stories of how God's love and mercy rescued them from lives of hatred and violence. I have told you my own story of a life changed through a relationship with God and with other Christians. I also think there are probably people you know who would benefit from God's love and mercy to rescue them from lives of hatred and violence. How do they find that love and mercy in today's world? Christ is the answer, the body of Christ and in turn the church.

We often hear how we are the planters / Sowers of seeds and whether a seed takes root and grows is according to God's plan. We know salvation for all is God's will and according to God's plan and purpose. If God has a purpose for our lives, and God indeed does, then we cannot successfully thwart that purpose. But I think the role for us in God's plan is to be like Ananias and become an instrument of God in the laying on of hands and enabling the ministry of those who are called by God. That means walking along side fellow members of the Christian community in their journey. The church must assist with the education of new believers, seekers, and / or non-believers. The church can be a safe place for people to come with their problems and not be judged or turned away because they are different.

The Tuesday Morning Bible Study ladies have been learning about what it means to be a church in covenantal relationship with God and others. An essential part of being in "Covenant" is knowing there is freedom to discuss differences and reaching consensus rather than being forced to take sides on issues. Part of being in covenantal relationship is accepting that the differences between us can enrich rather than divide, that what others can contribute to the worship experience makes us better together than apart.

What would this church do, if like Ananias, it were called on to accept the worst of the worst in today's world. If we were sent to enter the home on "straight" street and restore the sight of the blind Saul – how would we respond? You know something folks – I believe that is exactly what God is asking us to do today. We are called to take on the persecutors of God's children, to stand with the ones oppressed and to enable the Holy Spirit to restore sight to the blind. Of course that takes work and looking beyond what we see on Sunday mornings, we are called to go out in the world and act as the 'body of Christ' loving others, showing mercy, and forgiveness to the worst of the worst. The God who is Love has no need to be defended by violent means. We are not judge and jury – we

listen for God's call, walking humbly with God and loving others. It is through love that lives are changed – a loving God, a loving Jesus, a loving church.

It was love that set Peter on the right path after his stumbling denial of Christ, it was love that took Saul off that murderous path and sent him to 'straight' street. It was love that changed my life and your lives as well. What if we could be the instrument of love that changes this community?