



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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Sunday, May 1, 2022 Sermon “Better Call Saul” Bruce Bennett

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to You, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I’m going to speak only about our second reading, the passage from the *Acts of the Apostles*, because that was the passage we discussed at Bible Study on Thursday evening.

Why did I choose this title for the sermon? Some of you may have seen the series on Netflix and AMC *Better Call Saul*? I haven’t seen the show, but I’ve heard that the shady lead character, The TV Saul, is sort of a fixer, who does the dirty jobs that other criminals need to get done.

I’ve read that Saul in the Bible grew up in the city of Tarsus, in what would now be south-central Turkey, a Jew surrounded by Gentiles. This led him eventually to become one of the Pharisees, who believed that Israel, in order to survive, needed to adhere strictly to Jewish laws and traditions. It wasn’t just an opinion of his. It was more like a passion, or an obsession.

After finishing his education, he worked for the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, and his job was to make sure everybody obeyed Jewish laws to the letter. And, in those times, they thought their greatest threat came from those people who followed the teachings of Jesus, the group that called itself “The Way.”

Saul and the Pharisees leaders interpreted the Old Testament literally. For them, Jesus couldn’t possibly be the Messiah.

So Saul’s job was to put a stop to this movement, this group called “The Way.” With his passion, his obsession, and his training, he was the best at his job and rose to the top. His reputation for terrorizing the followers of Jesus was widely-known, and he was feared by many.

This is where we find Saul at the beginning of today’s reading [Scene 1, shall we say?], on the road to Damascus, ‘breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord’ and ‘if he found any who belonged to the Way...he might bring them bound [tied up] to Jerusalem.’

Then suddenly the famous flash of light from Heaven and the voice saying to him...**“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”**

Blinded, stunned, thrown to the ground, Saul struggles to speak. He croaks, “Who are you, Lord?”

The least likely response he could have imagined comes his way: **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.**

The voice goes on. **“But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”**

Scene 2: Damascus. A disciple, Ananias, hears the Lord calling to him in a vision. He replies, “Here I am, Lord.” Not “Who are you, Lord?” but “Here I am, Lord,” kind of like Samuel in the Old Testament. No questions asked. I’m here, reporting for duty. So we hear that Jesus asks Ananias to go to Saul and tell him that Jesus wants to restore his sight and fill him with the Holy Spirit and spread the Word of Jesus to everyone everywhere. And Jesus tells Ananias that Saul will be expecting him to show up. Scene 3: Ananias shows up and, instead of cringing and shaking in his sandals at the thought of laying hands on this crazed mass murderer, approaches him and leads with **“Brother Saul...”** And it works. Saul becomes Paul, Saint Paul, who spreads the Word of Jesus to more people than does any other disciple.

Ok, that in a nutshell is the “What?” of the story.

Next, let’s ask the next question: “So what?”

Is it just an amazing story of an instant religious conversion? Isn’t there more we can make of it? How might it fit with our church’s vision statement, which starts as follows: *“We are a community of believers, questioners, and questioning believers. We strive to be open and affirming to all. We sometimes disagree, yet love one another as we wade through the joy and pain of spiritual growth...”*

I was glad to find an essay by William Loader about this passage which helped me make more sense out of it. He starts by pointing out that both Luke, who wrote Acts, and Paul himself, who wrote most of the Letters, are not completely consistent when they describe the famous experience on the road to Damascus. Sometimes some people heard a voice but didn’t see the light, and sometimes they saw a light but didn’t hear a voice, etc. The important things were that the experience was more powerful for Saul than it was for the three men who rode with him, and that it was his background that probably made the difference.

He goes on to write that most likely the story isn’t really about conversion, or just about recruiting followers, or just about turning to God in order to be saved or be safe. He says it’s more about a calling, literally. Almost all the stories about the appearance and disappearance of Jesus involve asking disciples to do something. He goes on to say, as an example, that “what came alive again in the Easter story was not just a person, but that person’s passion and mission.”

That’s not all. Furthermore, “Paul would probably wonder what we are talking about when we distinguish conversion from call - and so most likely would Luke. That overwhelming sense of love, embodied in Christ, namely those identified with him and his story, broke through barriers and reached out to all. Paul saw himself as a prime example of this amazing grace - as did Luke. Such amazing grace also changed Paul’s perspective from a fearing defensive fundamentalism to a centered, critical interpretation, inspired by Jesus’ own stance. He was prepared to follow its logic to the end...asserting that in the love of God in Christ we are no longer under biblical law, even though we more than fulfill the legitimate demands it contains.”

he way I see it, it was not much of a surprise that Saul was able to shift from being the arch enemy of Christ’s faithful to becoming the leader of Christ’s faithful. He brought the same innate gifts and talents - his intellect, his organizational skills, his determination, his passionate nature, his profound sense of right and wrong - to both phases of his adult life: as the demonic Saul and the sainted Paul. It was just a new set of principles, a new guidebook, convincingly presented by none other than the Risen Jesus, that led him from his first phase of life to his second.

We’ve come to the last question: “Now what?” What do we do with this information? How does this story influence us, this mixture of bits of history and lots of creativity, told by a divinely-inspired person who was around when it happened?

I guess the first thing to acknowledge is that not everyone’s faith journey involves getting struck by lightning, or whatever it was that happened to Saul. At Bible Study on Thursday, some of us shared a bit about our own faith journeys, and they were all very different. None were sudden and complete, like that, but some had sudden elements to what was overall a gradual process. We were all still on journeys.

One thing that has meant a lot to me but I think applies to my understanding of this passage is something I’ve learned from over 20 years experience in Al-Anon. In 12-step programs, the idea of a “Higher Power” is a hard thing for many people to accept. Their literature talks a lot about giving oneself permission to find a personal understanding of one’s Higher Power that works for them. It talks about how people may differ in their capacities to embrace the concept or how long it may take for them, but over time it observes that most people do find a way that fits for them and are both pleasantly surprised and very grateful.

The same seems to be true here in our church. Few of us are wired to be able to see a proverbial “burning bush” and for those who have, it is exceedingly rare. For those who have heard or felt the actual presence of the Divine in their midst, it is likely not a frequent occurrence for most, and it is likely not the same for most, or the same each time.

And if and when we are “called” by some powerful connection to the Divine, what instruction do we receive? Is it the same for each of us who might have that experience? Not likely. Just look at what we do. Who is passionate about which cause? Who feeds the hungry? Who visits the sick and those in prison? Who stewards the planet and her creatures? Who creates beauty and in what ways? Who makes us laugh? Who listens deeply? Who knows when they’ve said enough?

Alleluia and Amen.