

## “FROM HUNTING TO FISHING”

“*Meanwhile, Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples...*” What an ominous beginning to our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles. “Still” implies history, and it begins with the story of Stephen. We met Saul in chapter 7; Luke calls him a “young man” who watched over the garments of those who stoned Stephen to death. He not only approved of Stephen’s death but also led a violent persecution of the community. “*But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison (8: 2-3)*” Saul is introduced to us as a violent, resourceful persecutor of this young movement. This was a man who was passionate about his Judaism. He clearly saw this new movement, named the Way, as a direct threat to what he held dear.

“*You know you have created God in your own image when God hates all the same people you do.*” I don’t remember where I heard that, but it is an incredible quote. Saul has made that mistake that we have seen repeated over and over again to justify violence in the name of faith. What will happen to enemies of this new movement? Will they develop laws, not necessarily God given laws, which justify stoning to death those who oppose them? The story of Saul instructs as well as informs. On the road to Damascus, a light from heaven and it must have been some serious light, suddenly flashed around him. He fell from his horse. Being that he was on a horse says something about his powerful status. Then he heard a voice saying, “*Saul, why are you persecuting me.*”

Saul is blinded, we know temporarily, but he is suddenly very vulnerable. He needs to rely on the help from another. Ananias is called upon to guide Saul through this transformative process, in spite of the fact that Ananias would have had every reason to kill Saul in his infantile state. Instead Ananias would be the midwife in Saul’s dramatic rebirth, which results in his being renamed Paul. The nature of the change is striking: Saul is helpless. The one, who was so active, in seeking letters so that he would have people arrested, was suddenly unable to do anything for himself. He has become like a little child. Wonderful imagery by Luke, echoing earlier words like a “little child shall lead them.” This is of course significant for Paul, but also for Ananias. Why would God choose as “God’s instrument” this person who had wreaked such havoc?

Ananias is literally called upon to heal the sight of the man who had threatened his very existence. That is significant, and again echoes the scene near the end of Jesus’ life. Remember that Peter, in a quixotic gesture, had taken out his sword at the arrest, and cut off the ear of a Roman guard. Jesus again chastises him, and then heals the ear of the guard. The same dynamic is going on with Ananias. He is healing a person who could very well go on to have many of his compatriots killed. We know what happens, but we have to imagine the feeling of revulsion that Ananias would have felt being called to heal his persecutor. Would it be like a calling to heal Osama Bin Laden? Or Saddam Hussein? Jesus preached that the world would be turned on its head, and this was just what was happening in the early church. Saul the persecutor would become Paul the spokesperson for this emerging movement. And it is terribly important to see the significance of the strong becoming weak---this is exactly the significance of the incarnation. It is the same theological strand which always had Jesus pointing beyond himself to the One who sent him. This story is not so much about Paul as it is about what God will do through faithful people. God can even use Saul!

Now it is staggering to me how the church got from this story of conversion to the crusades. It is a painful memory of the church, but the crusades were simply the attempt to wipe out those who did not share its faith or had a different faith. “*You know you have created God in your own image when God hates all the same people as you do.*” Wipe out the infidel was the battle cry of those who ventured off into foreign lands leaving a wake of destruction. The church seemed to have forgotten about this story of Saul’s conversion to Paul. They also forgot the story of Noah, when after God had destroyed every living thing, deciding to start over with Noah and a boat load of animals that God repented---“*never again will I destroy the earth and I will set a bow in the sky as a sign of this new covenant.*”

God learned thousands of years ago that violence will not change human hearts. How long will it take for us poor human beings to learn that same lesson? Saul was described as “hunting” for Christians “breathing threats of murder.” Whenever faith turns predatory, it has been transformed from the potential of good to the potential of evil. The early Christian movement must have felt to people like Saul as a strike against their obviously fragile world view; when struck, they strike back. The cycle of violence continues. Christians would be just as guilty when they were the powerful, dominant religion in the west. I heard a professor of Middle Eastern studies interviewed this week and he said, “The hatred toward the United States has reached new heights because of the war in Iraq. I believe terrorism will reach beyond what we saw on 9/11.”

I hope that a new government can be established in Iraq. I hope that the conflict in the West Bank can be resolved, and that there will finally be stability in the Middle East. I hope that the cycle of violence can be broken, but human history tells a different story. Violence breeds more violence. The United States feels justified in using our incredible power in Iraq, but our action will undoubtedly fuel the rage that led to the suicidal rampage that sent us to war. Walter Wink writes, “...Do not respond to evil in kind. This refusal of reactive opposition is one of the most profound and difficult truths in scripture. We become what we hate. The very act of hating something draws it to us. Since our hate is usually a direct response to an evil done to us, our hate almost invariably causes us to respond in the terms already laid down by the enemy. Unaware of what is happening, we turn into the very thing we oppose.” (*Engaging the Powers*, p. 195)

Saul was a hunter; Paul becomes a fisherman. I hate having to come up with sermon titles, but I really loved this one. Jesus called the disciples to drop their nets, follow him, and he would make them fishers of women and men. It takes a little bit of imagination to get where I am going with this. I am not a hunter or fisher, but what struck me in these two passages was the contrast between the two. I don’t think of fishing with a net, but with a rod, reel, and bait of some sort. It seems much more passive, waiting for the fish to hook themselves. Hunting on the other hand is always violent and aggressive. Poor Bambi! Don’t read too much into this. I am a meat eater and I know that what I eat had to be killed. This is a metaphor, and I think a metaphor faithful to the Jesus movement.

If the very act of hate draws us to it, the same can be said for love. If we could love with the same ferocity with which we hate, imagine the power to transform hearts and minds. That is what Jesus did. He loved with abandon---he did not take the role of hunter, but of fisher, inviting people to see the world in a different way. Remember that the resurrection is not about one person’s escape from the grave, but is the victory of powerless love over loveless power. In this passage from John, the story continues. Easter faith is what Jesus calls from his disciples. The love is not a feeling, but action. Jesus says, “Peter do you love me?” Peter answers “Yes.” Jesus replies, “Feed my sheep.”

If Christianity was only about a personal relationship with Jesus, I imagine that Peter’s response of “of course I love you Lord,” would have been enough. I think it is clear from this passage that is not at all what Jesus is interested in. He always pointed beyond himself to the One who sent him; he never wanted to have people focus on him, and that continues after the resurrection. He lived a kingdom life, and calls all disciples to the same task. We are Christ’s kingdom builders, and that work includes healing, feeding, clothing, housing the homeless, resettling refugees, and freeing the oppressed. Whenever we ask ourselves what it means to love Jesus, Jesus’ voice will remind us that to love him, we need to love the least of these our sisters and brothers.

In 1906, Picasso began a portrait of Gertrude Stein. She sat for him more than 90 times. Eventually in great desperation he wiped away the face completely on the painting. He left Paris, and, upon his returns, rushed to resume the portrait. When at last he revealed the portrait to his friends, his friends complained that it looked not at all like Gertrude Stein. Picasso, with great genius, had portrayed Stein, not by her superficial facial characteristics, but by her inner essence. More than that, he portrayed Stein, not as she had been, or even as she was in the present, but as she would be. Picasso said, “Everybody thinks she is not at all like her portrait, but nevermind; in the end she will manage to look just like it.” I love that illustration because it speaks to the human condition from a faith perspective. Think of visionary biblical literature in this way. This is the world not as it is, nor even as it has been, but rather, through the mind of the great artist God, the world as it shall be.

So many biblical stories, like the story of the conversion of Saul in Acts, is transformative literature, stories of the transformation of people into whom God would have us be.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand. The reign of God had begun, but certainly was not complete. Resurrection is not so much about the next life, whatever that will look like, but about this life. Resurrection is God's assurance that we do not labor in vain. God will redeem our lives and death, which means that nothing can separate us from the love of God. In theory that should give us the confidence to live our lives with the same abandon that we saw in Jesus and that first generation of disciples.

William Sloane Coffin in his new book *Credo* writes, "Courage is a crucial virtue, for once again the currents of history are churning into rapids, threatening to carry before them everything we have loved, trusted, looked to for pleasure and support. We are being called upon to live with enormous insecurity. The churches could become centers of creative and courageous thinking. They could also become sanctuaries for frightened Americans, recruiting grounds for authoritarian figures and movements, some of which already bear the earmarks of an emerging fascism. Will we be scared to death or scared to life? It all depends on where we find our ultimate security." (p. 150)