

November 20, 2016: Accidental Saints: Paul

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Over the past few weeks, we've been looking at the way God uses everyday ordinary people – sometimes, the last people you'd think – to do amazing things for God's work and kingdom building. We looked at the lessons of faith from some of these unexpected and accidental saints – we learned from Joseph about extravagant forgiveness and how trusting that God can bring good out of any situation can give us the strength to persevere despite life's challenges. From Gideon, we learned to always trust that God has made us all uniquely gifted, and to not devalue or disregard the giftedness in us – for God can and will use us, with the blessing of the Spirit's power to do more than we could imagine. Last week, we learned from Esther, who was willing to put her life on the line and stand up for the good of many, trusting that God could use her context and gifts to do God's work for such a time as this! These saints of our faith tradition did not become so because they were uber holy or because they were perfect – rather, they became saints because they were willing to let God use them where they were, with all their faults and failures, to do unexpected and amazing things.

This week, we turn to one of the most unexpected and influential saints in our Christian faith – the Apostle Paul. Many of us know Paul as the early church leader, the missionary who traveled from city to city, town to town, throughout the gentile communities, spreading the gospel and building churches wherever he went. Paul, in combination with his followers and emulators, wrote a large portion of the New Testament – the letters we call Epistles written to the communities of faith that were developing in the Gentile world or to other faith leaders – Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews. It is because of Paul's dogged perseverance and faithfulness to church planting that the early church spread – transforming from a movement within Judaism to something so much more – to a religion of its own that extended beyond the Jewish people into the Gentile world, welcoming all within its reach.

This champion of the faith that we think of today was not always who Paul was... in fact, Paul – first known as Saul – began by persecuting Jesus's followers. He was raised as a good Jewish boy from Tarsus, the Hebrew name given him by his parents was Saul, but, because his father was a Roman citizen (and therefore Saul inherited Roman citizenship), Saul also had the Latin name Paul. Since he grew up in a strict Pharisee environment, the name Saul was by far the more appropriate name to go by. Saul was educated in the finest schools, taught to read and write, studied classical philosophies and was doing his best to rise in ranks and status within the Jewish leadership.

We first hear about this man named Saul in our scriptures when we read in Acts chapter 7 of the first persecution of Jesus' disciples – the stoning of Stephen. You see, after Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples did not just go away quietly. After their experience at Pentecost where they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began preaching and teaching, healing and performing miracles in Jesus' name. They were continuing on the work that Jesus had begun – and the Jewish leadership was not happy about it! In their attempt to quell the momentum building within this movement, they began arresting and bringing to trial the teachers of the Way – as it was called. We hear of Stephen's trial in chapter 7, during which the people rose up against him and that is where we read this... "58Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." Saul makes his

biblical debut as one condoning this persecution – guarding the coats while the witnesses pummel Stephen. Not a great opening scene... and it gets worse before it gets better.

Our scripture today picks up the story in chapter 9, most likely some time has passed and the persecutions in Jerusalem have continued, and here we encounter Saul seeking permission from the High Priest to be sent out on a persecution mission to Damascus – a 5 or 6-day journey from Jerusalem. His convictions against people of “the Way”, as well as his blind ambition to be noticed among the Jewish leadership, takes him on this “over and above” mission, something that he sought out, rather than was simply assigned.

But God has other ideas... for it is on this road to Damascus where Saul is struck by a blinding light... and while he and his traveling companions are all surrounded by the light and fall to the ground in fear, Saul was physically blinded. He hears a voice - “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Saul asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” This encounter with the risen Christ rocks him... and his traveling companions take him to Straight Street in Damascus to recoup for a few days. In the darkness, unable to see, he sits and refuses food and drink for three days. His transformation is incomplete... he doesn’t know how to respond, so he sits in the dark and waits... waits to understand... waits to see...

I wonder what was going through his head in those dark days... We’ve all had dark days, haven’t we? Times when we feel like we’ve been hit over the head with some truth or another, and we don’t know how to process it... what it means for our lives. We wonder, will it change us, or is change too hard to even contemplate? Is it easier to just go back to life as usual... making the same mistakes we’ve always made, hurting the same people we’ve always hurt?

And it is in that dark space of waiting that Christ reaches out again... but this time it’s not through blinding light, but through the healing touch of a stranger. While Saul sat in the dark pondering, Christ was actively seeking out someone to bring him back to the light, Ananias – a follower of the Way from Damascus. And as you can only imagine, this task of seeking out Saul, of laying hands on him and healing him, restoring his sight – is probably the last thing Ananias wants to do! He’d heard about Saul, this terrible man who was hunting down and persecuting his friends, who was putting Ananias’s life in danger through his religious zeal. Ananias questions the Lord, pushes back at this request, but Christ answers back, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.” This man... this terrible man, who stood by as coats were piled at his feet when Stephen was stoned to death, who actively sought out a persecution mission, was the chosen one to spread Christ’s name to Gentiles and kings.

Through Ananias’s willingness to follow Christ’s command, to enter what probably felt like the lion’s den, and heal Saul – he helped to make Saul’s transformation complete. Upon his touch and healing prayer, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes and his sight was restored. He got up and was baptized, ate and began to regain his strength. After spending a few days with the disciples in Damascus, he began his preaching ministry, first in the synagogues, and then eventually throughout the surrounding nations, traveling on land and by sea to spread the gospel message wherever he could.

As unlikely a candidate for sainthood as Saul was, he was chosen because of his gifts, because of his zeal and willingness to step out in faith and act. Who knows what would have happened to the people of the Way – those who followed Jesus’s teachings in those early days if Saul had never had this conversion experience. If he had continued persecuting the early Christians, rather than joining them and working with them. I wonder if we’d be here today? If Christianity as we know it would even exist?

There's a few key points from Saul's story that I'd like us all to reflect on this week.

First, is the recognition that NO ONE is beyond redemption, not ourselves, and not others, no matter how bad we deem them to be... no matter what we've done. We cannot write anyone off as a hopeless case – for you never know what gifts and experiences God can use within them to do great things!

Second, we can't do this alone! As we see through Saul's story, sainthood is only realized by the help of others – through Ananias and the disciples who took a chance on him. We need others along the journey to help us up, be the healing hands of God in our lives, share with us the good news and help us see the good within us that God can use. Always, always be thankful for your journey partners – the fellowship of saints that surrounds you along this broken and blessed road.

And last, never underestimate the power that God can work through you in another person's life. You never know when you may be called to be an Ananias for someone else, to help them complete their transformation, to help the scales fall from their eyes as they emerge from the darkness into the light. When God calls you to GO, I pray that you will be willing, that you will risk discomfort and unease, for you can't even imagine the good you can bring about in the life of another through God's help.

As we close out this series on Accidental Saints, it is my hope and prayer that you have been able to see yourselves as part of God's multitude of saints... holy and blessed, imperfect and accidental... May we not be afraid to use the amazing gifts that God made in us to share love, healing, and hope with a hurting world.