

*God who calls us into service, transform us as you transformed Paul.  
Shape us into children who rejoice in knowing and proclaiming you to the world. Amen.*

April 15, 2018 – Acts 9:1-19a

### **“Blinded By the Light”**

If I’m honest, I have to admit that I have a love-hate relationship with Paul. On one hand, his writings have been used by fundamentalist Christians to justify slavery, oppress women, and degrade the LGBT community. Beyond that, he strikes me as somewhat arrogant, with his repeated boasts of equal status to the likes of Peter, James, and John. And some of his teachings even seem to contradict those of the Jesus who is portrayed in the gospels.

All that being said, without Paul, Christianity as we know it wouldn’t exist. Paul’s contributions to the New Testament include at least seven of his letters to various churches, some written even before any of the Gospels. And because Paul was one of the earliest and most effective missionaries of his time, Christianity eventually overtook all of the Roman Empire, giving it a foothold among other major world religions.

But another reason why it’s worth our while to pay a bit of attention to Paul is because of what took place in this morning’s reading. We don’t know a whole lot about Paul prior to his conversion experience, but we know enough. We know that he was a fanatical extremist noted for his hatred of Christians. Because he believed the teachings of Jesus violated Mosaic Law, he harassed and jailed followers of The Way, as they were called at that time. We know that he was a bystander who watched as Stephen, a deacon of the early Church, was stoned to death by Temple authorities. And we know that he received permission from the high priest to go to Damascus for the purpose of imprisoning more followers of Christ.

As far as Paul was concerned, the teachings of Jesus were seen as a threat to Mosaic Law and considered to be heretical. Therefore any followers of Jesus were a threat to Judaism, and so Paul committed himself to eliminating as many of those followers as possible from the picture. In short, the table of God’s mercy, as Paul understood it, was reserved only for Jews.

But in this morning’s text, Paul has an eye-opening experience – or rather, an eye-closing experience – in which he came to a new understanding of God: one in which the grace of God trumped the Law of Moses. One in which the table of salvation was expanded to include more than just the descendants of Abraham.

As the story goes, Paul was on his way to Damascus to seek out Christians, so that he might put them under lock and key. But along the way, he was struck down by a blinding light. And while he was crawling around on the ground trying, no doubt, to regain his senses, he heard the voice of Jesus ask him why he, Paul, was persecuting Jesus, followed by instructions to go to Damascus where he would receive further information. So Paul, now a blind man, was taken by the hand like a little child, and led by his traveling companions to a house in Damascus, where for three days he continued to be blind, during which time he ate and drank nothing.

Sometimes, we have to be knocked off our high horse before we can embrace the ways of a God whose unconditional love extends to everyone. If we allow the Spirit to have her way with us, then it often means rethinking our previous notions of God’s grace. And as we reexamine our beliefs about God, it might even feel as if we are groping our way through spiritual darkness, in much the same way Paul must have fumbled his way for the next three days. Our text says that he went without food or drink during that time. And when the Spirit is working in us, we may find that we need to give up that which has nourished us in the past, such as our preconceived notions about what God’s grace looks like and to whom it is extended. This spiritual darkness is a time marked by doubt and uncertainty, one in which everything we hold to be true is challenged.

Paul couldn’t have known it at the time, but God had big plans for him. But he would need to

experience an attitude adjustment before those plans could be realized. An attitude adjustment that would involve the participation of the very ones Paul was persecuting.

In our text, even while Paul was trying to make sense of everything that had happened to him, God was hard at work in Damascus, instructing a follower of The Way, named Ananias, to restore Paul's sight by laying hands on him. Having heard of Paul's notorious reputation, Ananias wasn't too keen on the idea, but in the end, obeyed God. He entered the house where Paul was staying, and addressing Paul as his brother, he gently laid his hands upon Paul, causing his vision to be restored. But how Paul saw the world afterward was much different than the way he had seen it prior to his Damascus road experience because now he understood that God's table of grace wasn't limited to Jews, but was much larger than he ever could have imagined. It was a table large enough to accommodate his hated enemies, too.

And so the question for us today is: Is the table at which we experience God's grace big enough to include our opponents? The very ones who we feel have it all wrong?

Paul was sincere in his belief that Christians were a threat to all God-fearing folks. Who have we said can't possibly be Christian if they believe differently than we do?

The church of the small table is what John Pavlovitz calls "a group of well-meaning but carefully managed impostors, all sharing only those things they believe will secure their spot and sustain their inclusion." Some of the shared beliefs of today's small-table churches include their own narrow views about sexual orientation and sexual identity. But they also may include views about political affiliations, gun control, and immigrant status. These are the things that will keep the table of grace small unless we make efforts to open and enlarge it. Pavlovitz makes the observation that "the far extremes of the Right and the Left have grown frighteningly similar; each expends great energy vilifying the other. The former broker in fear of the other's perceived immorality, the latter in anger at the other's apparent intolerance."

So God is inviting us – no, God is commanding us – to enlarge our tables. In his book entitled, "A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community," John Pavlovitz writes, "One of the biggest, most damaging mistakes too many Christians so willingly make is assuming that God is as much of a judgmental jerk as we are." He goes on to point out that, "In a world where most of us are content to shout our opinions at relative strangers from a safe space, the radical hospitality of Christ pulls people closer and demands that we see and hear them. And once we view a person in the illuminating light of actual relationship, we can't help but see the God in them... Imagine what it would look like," he says, "if we had no other agenda than walking alongside people sharing the view of God from where we stand, not needing them to see what we see, or believe what we believe, but to encounter Jesus in our very flesh."

So what might that look like in our own church? What might it look like if Republicans and Democrats could sit at the same table and share their own stories without casting judgment on the other? What would it be like if we could have holy conversations with each other around issues like immigration, guns, and abortion? Is it possible for us to enlarge our table to include those with radically different opinions than ours?

This is what God demanded from both Paul and Ananias. It's a tall order. But until we are able to do the same, we cannot expect to experience God's dominion on earth as it is in heaven.

When the voice of Jesus asked Paul, "Why are you persecuting me?" Jesus is clearly making the point that how we treat others – even if we feel justified in calling them out as our enemies – how we treat others is how we treat Jesus. And when we refuse to hear the words of others, we are refusing to hear Jesus.

May God grant that the scales fall from our own eyes, so that we might see God in our opponents and hear God in their voices. And may we do the difficult and messy work of extending our table to include everyone, no exceptions. Amen.