Seeing Clearly Peace Presbyterian Church

Acts 9:1-20 3rd Sunday of Easter

Elizabeth M. Deibert 5 May 2019

Seeing clearly – not always easy. For instance, I thought the story was about Paul. It is but it isn’t. With God, life is just more interesting and complex. When the church of Jesus Christ was in its earliest days, many of the early followers still understood themselves to be Jewish. After all, Jesus was a Jew and he taught that he was on earth to fulfill the covenant with God’s people and to open it to all people. Paul was against the Christians – seeing them as distorting the true faith. Ananias, the fearful one was understandably afraid of Paul, the hater.

Most of us cannot relate to Paul – to his hateful persecution of Christians and then his dramatic conversion to join them. If you can’t beat them, join them. But we can relate to Ananias, not wanting to go to deal with the hater. Like Ananias, I’m a little frightened of the legalism of right-wing Christianity. I am nervous to confront, thinking there’s nothing I can do to help them see, especially given their influence over culture and their support of powerful political leaders who, in my estimation do not seem to understand the way of Christ.

Just as Paul thought the early Christians to be heretics, unfaithful to Jewish law, so there are Christians who probably consider me to a heretic. Just as Paul wanted to silence them, be rid of them, so there are some Christians today who would like to be rid of people like me. They think women should not be leaders in the church. They think the church should not affirm marriage equality. They think that we dishonor Christ by welcoming everyone who seeks Christ to the communion table. But in the Book of Acts, God seems to be powerfully and explicitly on the side of those who were inclusive, welcoming, and not rigid about rules. Saul was one of the rule-bound people who was so upset about the Christians, he was persecuting them, “breathing threats and murder” against them until Jesus knocked some graceful sense into him. Notice Jesus does not say “Why are you persecuting my people, but instead says, “Why are you persecuting me?” And the powerful persecutor is blinded, his power stripped.

**Acts 9:1 -20** (NRSV)

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **2**and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. **3**Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4**He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” **5**He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. **6**But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” **7**The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. **8**Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. **9**For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. **10**Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” **11**The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, **12**and he has seen in a vision[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+9%3A1-20&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-27217a)] a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” **13**But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; **14**and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” **15**But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; **16**I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”  **17**So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Sauland said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” **18**And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, **19**and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, **20**and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

For three days, Paul was struck blind and anorexic. Three days in the tomb of despair, until he was healed and baptized by Ananias. It was three dark days, maybe years until he was singing, “I saw the light. I saw the light. No more darkness. No more night.” We could talk about the fact that this type of dramatic conversion is rare, except for those who exaggerate. Or we can notice that in this conversion – there are three elements – First God gets Paul’s attention. Getting his attention means that there is some suffering, some limitation, some shock value. Life bring surprises our way too. As C.S Lewis says, “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is [God’s] megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” There is always more than meets the eye.

But it is not just God speaking directly to us, but God then sending us our Ananias. We need God moments and human moments to help us see more clearly. And this is the most remarkable part of the story to me – that God would be calling Ananias, saying, “Yes, I know you are frightened -- many of your friends were murdered by this guy – but I’m telling you, he is different now.” And that Ananias has the courage to say, (singing) “Here I am, Lord. Please not me, Lord. I have heard Saul killing in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me; reassure me I will be alright.” So the Lord is converting Ananias while converting Paul, reassuring Ananias that there is a valuable purpose for this hateful, Christian-killer. Doesn’t it just drive you crazy?! You want to be able to write a person off, and the Lord says, “Nope. I have a valuable and significant purpose for that one whom you despise and fear.”

So maybe God is speaking to us today, to keep the conversation going with people who are threatening to us, with people we’d like to ignore, with people who hate us, who think we are totally off-base. Maybe when the Lord of Light gifts us with the calling and the ability to engage such a person, healing will happen. Perhaps eyes will be opened and the Holy Spirit might work her magic on closed minds and hearts. Ananias gives us hope, because God can work miracles even with those who would do us harm. Paul became the chief missionary to the Gentiles – ironically the Pharisee is hanging out with the unclean, eating at table with them, because now his eyes are open. Thanks, Ananias, for listening to the Spirit. Ananias reminds us of all the people who humbly and bravely care for those who become significant. Without Ananias’ healing love, what would have happened to Paul. Of the 27 books of the New Testament, seven of them are written by Paul and another six attributed to him, probably written by one of his devotees in the next generation. Paul who had been so trapped in the law, now sees that saying, “We are saved by grace through faith, and this is not of ourselves. That quite apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed.”

Rachel Held Evans, an influential progressive Christian writer and speaker who very effectively utilized social media to challenge the southern evangelical culture of her up-bringing, died yesterday at age 37, due to a bizarre reaction to antibiotics. She leaves behind her husband and young children, ages 3 and 1. Though she joined the Episcopalians in 2014, Rachel bravely and with much levity stayed in the conflicted conversation and the culture wars to give voice to the many younger adults who were struggling with the exclusionary practices of conservative evangelical churches. Her blog, twitter feed, and four very popular books paved the way for many who found themselves needing to wander away from a legalistic, patriarchal, and homophobic faith.

Her last blog post was on Ash Wednesday. *It strikes me today that the liturgy of Ash Wednesday teaches something that nearly everyone can agree on. Whether you are part of a church or not, whether you believe today or your doubt, whether you are a Christian or an atheist or an agnostic or a so-called “none” (whose faith experiences far transcend the limits of that label) you know this truth deep in your bones: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.” Death is a part of life. My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality, and that you will know you are not alone.*

Seeing clearly – sometimes it means staying in the conversation with people when it is difficult, being the grace-filled healing presence. Paul preaching to Gentiles. Ananias going to heal the hater. Rachel speaking up for people who were told to keep silent in church. And you doing the hard thing the Spirit calls you to do.