

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Pray for your enemies

God may have big plans for them.

Scripture: Acts 9:1-19

Rev. Steve Filyk

May 1 2022

Communion Sunday

Opening Hymn: Christ The Lord Is Risen Today [247]

Choruses: Amazing Grace (My chains are gone), Days of Elijah (Mark)

Communion Hymn: Behold the Lamb (Getty)

Closing Hymn: And can it be that I should gain [352]

How do you respond to people who cause you trouble?

Do you confront them?

Do you avoid them?

Do you secretly plot against them?

One person tells a story of someone

Who got even with their enemy:

"I have a friend whose pumpkin fall display

at the end of his driveway

would be run over by the neighborhood jerk.

[It] happened every year...

[One year he had enough and]

withdrew money from his savings account

so he would have enough

to buy the largest [pumpkin] he could find,

along with several large bags of Quikcrete.

[He filled] that puppy up and made a real pretty display.

The [neighbor] broke the axle of his... car

when he hit that pumpkin..."ⁱ

How do you respond to people who cause you trouble?

Do you confront them?

Do you avoid them?

Do you secretly plot against them?

How about this: do you pray for them?

I mean this is what Jesus tells us to do.

In his 'Sermon on the Mount' Jesus says to his listeners:

“You have heard that it was said,
 ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

But I tell you, love your enemies
 and pray for those who persecute you,
 that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

Most of the time we don’t do this.
 But sometimes we do.
 And these prayers can have an incredible effect.

PAUSE

Today’s lesson comes to us from the New Testament book of Acts.
 In terms of the ongoing story of Jesus and his disciples,
 We have moved past those initial post-resurrection experiences:

Jesus appearing among his disciples behind locked doors.

Jesus has ascended to the Father
 and has sent his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Empowered by that Spirit,
 the once fearful group of followers
 begins to boldly share the story of Jesus.

Hearing their testimony,
 Many people start believing
 that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

But those same religious leaders
 that tried to stop Jesus
 now see Jesus’ followers as a threat.

At first they warn the apostles against speaking about Jesus.
 After Stephen speaks to the Sanhedrin
 They respond with violence, stoning him to death.

This is where we encounter a man named Saul.
 Saul guards their cloaks
 Of the people who stone Stephen.

Saul is a Pharisee from Tarsus.
 He is zealous about the faith of his fathers.

He approves of Stephen’s execution.
 And he takes leadership in rounding up
 The new followers of Jesus in Jerusalem

and throwing them into jail.

As these believers scatter,
Saul broadens his search for them.

He gets the High Priest's authorisation to
Pursue these Christians all the way to Damascus [in Syrian]
and drag them back to Jerusalem as prisoners.

For your information:

"Damascus was an important Syrian city
about 135 miles north of Jerusalem
and a leading commercial center of the Roman Empire.

Josephus reports that the city was home to a large population of Jews...
[And we can infer that Saul's interest in policing
The synagogues of Damascus that]

"the disciples of the Lord" have settled in Jewish neighborhoods
and now threaten the faith of their congregations.

Saul's [crusade] is to ferret out
and "bind" any religious renegade he finds there
and return them to Jerusalem for a religious inquisition."ⁱⁱ

You can imagine the stories being shared
Within that Christian community:
"Keep your eyes open!"
"Watch your back!"

"That man who helped executed Stephen
Is coming for us!"

But Saul doesn't reach his goal, his objective.
Along the road to Damascus
Paul is stopped dead in his tracks.

The popular recollection is that Saul is knocked off his horse.

Our reading simply states that a light flashes from heaven
Saul falls to the ground,
And hears a voice:

"Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?"
"Who are you, Master?" Saul responds.

"I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down.
I want you to get up and enter the city.

In the city you'll be told what to do next."ⁱⁱⁱ

But if you think this is astonishing
You need to keep on reading.

The same Jesus that grabs hold of
A persecutor of the new church,
Grabs hold of one of the Jesus' followers in Damascus.

Jesus appears to a man named Ananias.

*[Not Ananias of Ananias and Sapphira.
Not Ananias the High Priest,
But Ananias of Damascus,*

*Someone Saul later speaks of as being
"a devout observer of the law and highly respected
By all the Jews living there."^{iv}]*

Jesus appears to Ananias in vision,
and gives him the address of the now-blinded Saul.
Jesus tells Ananias to go and pray for Saul's healing.

Ananias protests: "Master, you can't be serious.
Everybody's talking about this man
and the terrible things he's been doing,
his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem!

And now he's shown up here with papers
from the Chief Priest that give him license
to do the same to us."

[But Jesus tells him] "Don't argue.
Go! I have picked him as my personal representative
to non-Jews and kings and Jews.
And now I'm about to show him what he's in for—
the hard suffering that goes with this job."^v

Can you imagine Jesus calling you
To drive across town
and pray for your enemy?

To pray that they might be delivered
from some affliction they are facing?

We'd protest too like Ananias.
And we might try to ignore Jesus.

But Ananias is obedient.

Ananias finds his enemy Saul,
addresses him as 'brother',
and prays for his healing.

And right then and there,

The scales drop from Saul's eyes
And he is filled with God's Spirit.

It's an amazing story especially when you consider
The subsequent ministry that Paul engages in.

God takes someone "who had been a witness against the followers of Christ
to become a powerful witness for Christ."
God causes Paul to do a complete 180.

But equally amazing is how God uses Ananias.
God calls Ananias to bless an enemy,
And through the process he becomes family.

We don't often think of Ananias's.

But Ananias "has an honoured place in sacred history,
and a special claim upon the gratitude of all [of us]
who in one way or another have entered
into the blessing that stems
from the life and work of [Paul]."^{vi}

So who do you consider a personal enemy?
Who do you consider an enemy of the church?

It might be that guy around the corner
That runs over your fall display.
It might be a former boss or co-worker.
It could be an educator or an activist lobbying for values
You consider reprehensible.

Could it be that God has unexpected plans for this person?
Could it be that your prayers for this person
will be the catalyst for God's transformation of their life?

ⁱ Balčiauskas, Mindaugas. "40 Of The Most Satisfying Petty Revenge Stories People Shared In This Viral Online Thread." Bored Panda, 26 Apr. 2022, www.boredpanda.com/people-share-petty-revenge-stories

ⁱⁱ Robert W. Wall, "Exegetical Perspective on Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 405.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 9:4-6 MSG

^{iv} Acts 22:12 NIV

^v Acts 9:13-16 NIV

^{vi} Contributors to Wikimedia projects. "Ananias of Damascus - Wikipedia." 13 Feb. 2022, en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ananias_of_Damascus&oldid=1071702854.