

August 20, 2017
Lesson 12: Called to Preach
Scripture: Acts 9: 10-20

Context:

Today we read about part of the call story for Paul and Ananias. A little background on this text reveals the importance of what happens in this text. While the pericope starts and focuses on Ananias, we hear about his instruction to go meet a man named Saul of Tarsus. But this is not the first time our writer of Acts has mentioned him. In the story of Stephen, we meet Saul as a “young man” who watched over the garments of those who stoned early church leader Stephen.¹ But that’s just the beginning of Paul’s interaction with the Christian community. According to the author, Saul was responsible for ravaging the early church by capturing men and women and placing them in prison.² Thus, Saul is not someone that the early church would want to invite to worship or fellowship. As we read Saul’s story, the author is enforcing the belief that we are reading the story of an enemy.³

Thus, the drama is heightened when we hear that Saul will be converted to become a Christian. In the first of the three accounts of Saul’s conversion (see Acts 22 and Acts 26), we hear of Saul being blinded on the road to Damascus and the Lord telling Saul to wait to be told what he will be called to do. Thus, we meet the main character of our text today, Ananias. As the early church spread beyond Jerusalem, there were disciples in all the villages and the city. They were probably small in number and they were very tight knit. There is no doubt that as good neighbors, they would watch out for those who persecuted and arrested Christians.

When Ananias has a vision from God, he responds with the response “Yes, Lord.” The Lord though gives him strange instructions to go to the visit Saul of Tarsus and to heal him to help restore his sight. But the word has traveled. Ananias knows that Saul has been on the prowl hurting and seeking other Christians in Jerusalem. He places them in prison and jeopardizes the Christian movement. But God’s response is strong: “Go!” There is no arguing in this matter as God has chosen this man to carry his name to the Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. He will be one to suffer for the Lord.

Unlike others who may have pleaded or bargained with God, Ananias goes to the house where Saul dwells. There he calls Saul, a noted “enemy” of the Christians his brother. In the midst of it Ananias touches him and Saul is baptized and then fed food to regain his strength. In one moment he receives the beautiful waters of baptism and the rich Eucharistic elements that bring him into the body of Christ. Following this encounter with Ananias, Saul stays in Damascus with the disciples and then begins to preach about

¹ Acts 7:58, NRSV.

² Acts 8:2-3, NRSV.

³ William H. Willimon, “Acts,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1988), 75.

Jesus in the synagogues saying: “He is God’s son.” A miracle has occurred. A persecutor of the church now becomes the biggest advocate. Thus we begin to hear more about Paul and his ministry in the early church.

Application:

There are several themes here that stick out in the story. The first deals with the character Ananias. We only meet him shortly, but in that time, we hear him accomplish a particular mission and then move on. Ananias has no background except that he is a disciple, one who follows Jesus. He is an ordinary man without credentials and one we know little about. But the most important part was that he heard God call and he responded by healing Saul and welcoming this man people might have deemed an “enemy.” I think we learn an important lesson with Ananias about listening to God and being hospitable. It was not Ananias’ place to judge Saul or to condemn him. His job was to go and heal Saul; to welcome him in the faith. What a marvelous example for all of us who say that we are just “ordinary” Christians. We may be “ordinary,” but that doesn’t excuse us from serving our Lord in whatever ways we may be called. In our churches I think it reminds us to do certain things: to meet that first time visitor who may be nervous, to help with that sign-up list to be a teacher, or to serve in a new ministry that might be a first for the church. As disciples of Jesus, we are all important in how we act as a body of Christ. Ananias was not one of the prominent “heroes” of the faith like Peter or Philip, but his contribution to the early church was certainly important. God uses all people to do amazing things.

The second theme that sticks out in this pericope is how the church hears how God transforms an enemy into a member and leader of the faith. This story is between the episode of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40) and the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius (10:1-11:18).⁴ God is at work to bring different people into the church. It was not just a place for Jewish believers who converted to Christianity; it was a place for foreign people, Gentiles, and even critics of the church. I am sure that Saul faced challenges as he began to preach in the synagogues and going to see different disciples in the early church.

It calls into account the people we label “enemy.” There are times when I think we misuse that word. I always cringe when I hear people say: “They can’t really be a Christian. They do this or that. They voted for so-and-so. They hang out with *those* kind of people.” While the marks of discipleship and growing in holiness is certainly important, we should always remember that God is the one in the business of calling and using people as instruments. There are times when I have been surprised at people who I later see leading the church or going to church. You know the whispering that goes on: “She actually showed up at the church service dressed to the nines!” or “He was right there in front of God and everybody.” They might be cynics, the constant “sinner,” or even “saints” who have fallen from glory for an indiscretion. Later on, I hear about a devoted laity or a pastor who simply welcomed them or listened to their story of pain where they felt attacked by the church or abandoned by God. Or maybe they went on some retreat, went to a Bible study, attended a powerful worship service, or random encounter with a Christian outside the church where that person felt a change in their heart. God spoke to them and they realized that God did indeed love them or forgave

⁴ Ibid., 79.

them of their sin. Our job as fellow Christians is to love them, affirm them, and shed that ugly word “enemy” out of our vocabulary. God will use those “enemies” to do extraordinary things that are good for God’s Kingdom.

Respectfully,
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