

Beloved Enemy
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M Gingras
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Acts 9:1-19a

Anything is possible. You can be whatever you want to be. You can do whatever you set your mind to do. That's what I like to tell my children. I want to encourage them, to stir their ambitions, to open their eyes to a world full of exciting possibilities.

But you know what? It simply isn't true.

I will never play the piano like Will Duchon or paint an interior mural like Julie McClenathan, even if I decided to enroll in art school today. I will never remember all the people in my life who need prayer like Ann Zeiner does or have quite the combination of strength, intelligence and patience as Liz Sampson. I do not have the time or patience to be as well read as Nils Wiberg or the grace to do a standing back flip like Kyle Konkol. I will never be able to fix anything that is broken like Myron Winger. Sure, I can use a power tool safely but to rise to his talent? Not in my skill set!

We are who we are - limited by our genetic heritage, by our environment, our trauma, our innate capacities and personalities. And yet... "Limited" may not be the right word at all! "Limited" carries with it negative implications, suggesting that each of us is somehow less than we might otherwise be, as if there were some ideal prototype of fully realized humanity against which each of us is measured.

But there is no ideal. There are only individual human beings. And we can only understand what it is to be a human being one person at a time. And if I cannot be whatever I want to be, I should never measure myself against that expectation. I can only be who I am.

Whatever name you want to use for this traveler on the road to Damascus, Saul or Paul, he was who he was. Passionate, proud, rule-follower, intense, zealous... he was a doer. Not one to sit around exhausting committee meetings, batting around ideas, debating what to do with this troubling new sect they called "followers of the Way."

So when he determined that some of them were sullyng up the good name of his faith, he decided to do something about it! He was not a follower like so many sheep, Saul was a leader. He was not the type to hold out olive branches and host listening sessions like other peacemakers, he was a crusader.

Ironically, Saul is the one who finds himself meekly led by the hand into the city of Damascus and going without food or water for three days. He must have been quite weak, and quite a sight, by the time Ananias met him. How much of a threat could he have posed to the disciples at that point?

Unexpectedly, Ananias receives what most would call an unwelcome vision. He's being called to go and pray over a man who has been a terrorist to his people, a man who has imprisoned them and commissioned their murder. You can imagine the feelings that welled up inside Ananias when the Lord commanded him to go lay hands on his worst enemy and pray for his healing. We can understand why Ananias, knowing Saul's track record, might say, "Wait. What?" He might even want to whine a bit about the unfairness, and the risk, of what he's being asked to do. I know that I would!

Ananias surprises us, once he answers God's call, and goes the extra nine yards, calling Saul "Brother." Did his heart soften, perhaps, when he saw how weak and pitiful Saul looked? Perhaps receiving such mercy helped shape Paul's future ministry and theology. But just maybe, it's the prayer of healing for our enemies that ends up being the best thing for us.

Ananias is "an 'ordinary' Christian who demonstrates extraordinary courage and faithfulness in the compassion with which he treats Saul. After all, this broken man is the same one who is introduced earlier in the book of Acts goading on the public execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

After this experience, Saul moved ahead to get baptized, and to share communion, to be "ordained," and to live his life in the company of others who followed the Way of Jesus. Marcus Borg and Domenic Crossan speak of Paul being filled with the light of Jesus and the Spirit that opened his eyes and gave him "a new identity...a new community, and way of being." This new community would include--with Paul's tireless efforts--the most unlikely people.

Perhaps the most dramatic sign of Saul's conversion was his passionate commitment to sharing the gospel with the Gentiles. Saul's conversion, after all, isn't from one religion to another. He has a different kind of change of heart and mind, converting from passionately, even violently, opposing the radical inclusion of gentiles to becoming instead the greatest proponent of including them--how ironic!

Think of the importance of that in the big picture: Paul devoted the rest of his life to establishing and nurturing churches rather than focusing on the conversion of individual people.

I want to share with you another conversion story. From the age of 17, Arno Michaelis was deeply involved in the white power movement. He was a founding member of what became the largest racist skinhead organization in the world, a reverend of self-declared Racial Holy War, and lead singer of the race-metal band Centurion, selling over 20,000 CDs to racists round the world.

Michaelis grew up in an alcoholic household where emotional violence was the norm. As a child he reacted to that emotional violence by lashing out and hurting people. It started out as the bully on the school bus, and by the time he was in middle school he was committing serious acts of vandalism.

As a teenager, he got into the punk rock scene which for a while was the ultimate outlet for his aggression. But, like any other addiction, his thrill seeking needed constant cranking up, so when he encountered racist skinheads he knew he'd found something far more effective.

As a skinhead, here was his chance to be a warrior for a magnificent cause – to save the white race! At the time, he remembers truly believing that white people were under threat of genocide at the hands of some shadowy Jewish conspiracy. It made total sense to him, probably because nothing else in his world was.

So Michaelis assumed an identity where all that mattered was the color of his skin. He writes.... *"I remember one Thanksgiving dinner, when I was very vehemently and drunkenly spouting off my views, my mother said to me, 'Well, Mr Nazi, did you know that you're one-sixteenth Indian?' That completely shut me up right there and then, but later that night I went back to my own house and continued to drink beer out of glass bottles – until I*

broke a bottle and slit my wrist with it. That's how convinced I was that my racial identity was all I had."

Once he'd started down the path, violence became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more violence and hatred he put into the world, the more the world gave it back, which of course only further validated all his paranoia and conspiracy theories.

Michaelis wallowed in violence as a means of self-destruction and stimulation. Using white power ideology as justification and profuse alcohol abuse as a spiritual anesthetic, he practiced violence until it seemed natural. With his bare hands, he beat other human beings to the point of hospitalization over the color of their skin, their sexuality, or simply just for the adrenaline rush. Other kids trying to emulate him did much worse.

He even had a swastika tattooed on the middle finger of his right hand. One time he was greeted by a black lady at a McDonald's cash register with a smile as warm and unconditional as the sun. When she noticed the swastika tattoo on his finger, she said: 'You're a better person than that. I know that's not who you are.' Powerless against such compassion, he fled from her steady smile and authentic presence, never to return to that McDonald's again.

It wasn't until he became a single parent at age 24 that Michaelis began to distance himself from the movement. He'd lost a number of friends to either prison or a violent death by then and it started to occur to him that if he didn't change his ways, street violence would take him away from his daughter too. And once he began to distance himself from the constant reinforcing cycle of violence and hatred, suddenly it began to make much less sense to him.

For the first time he allowed himself to listen to whatever music he wanted to listen to, and watch whatever TV shows he wanted to watch – not just what had been approved by the white power movement. He began to spend time with people outside the movement as well. What he found was forgiveness - he was embraced and accepted by people who formerly he would have attacked on sight, and that was a very powerful thing.

But it took him a long time to work through his feelings of guilt and remorse for the harm he'd caused. Michaelis had effectively been on a ten year bender. Once he quit drinking, he felt the need to really make a positive impact and speak out publicly against racism and hatred.

In 2007, he began writing a reflective memoir and co-founded the online magazine Life After Hate.¹ Today he is a motivational speaker, and works with Serve2Unite, an organization that engages young people of all backgrounds and trains them as peacemakers.²

Michaelis admits that when he was younger his pain drove him to declare war on the world. He came to realize that responding to aggression with compassion is much, much more difficult than responding with anger and violence. It was the unconditional forgiveness he was given by people who he once claimed to hate that demonstrated for him the way to live with true compassion and love.³

A call is a call, and a conversion is a conversion, but often they are combined in the same experience. Whether or not our faith experiences are typically accompanied by a dramatic sound-and-light show, or they happen kind of slow and steady, we receive the same call that Saul did on that dusty road to Damascus. After looking honestly at our past and repenting, we are called to turn our faces toward God's future...[and] enter the process of completing God's joy by expanding God's love in the world.

In so many conversion stories, God will transform the lives of the most unexpected, unlikely people and use them in God's work. That includes you and me, and some folks we'd rather not think about, if we're honest. Surely God can't use them, we might think, but God surprises us in the most delightful ways. We live our lives in circumstances that may be dramatic at moments but are usually pretty every day. God's amazing grace is present and sufficient in every moment. And even if it takes us some time, God is with us. Amen.

¹ <http://lifeafterhate.com>

² www.serve2unite.org

³ <http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/arno-michaels-usa/>