

UNHINDERED: See What Love Can Do Series
A Street Called Straight (Acts 9:10-22)
Rev. Melissa Hatfield - First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO
September 13, 2020

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/unhindered-a-street-called-straight

This summer, I began a new series on Netflix called *Once Upon a Time*, which initially aired on ABC from 2011-2018. The show tells the story of a new world, one in which fairy-tale legends and modern life collide. It is the classic tale of the battle of good versus evil – both around us and within us. There are countless characters in the show, and several are heroes who mostly make good and selfless choices, although no one is perfect. But then there are those other characters – the ones who continually make bad choices even when they are trying to do good.

I love good versus evil storylines as long as good always wins as it should, but I especially love a good redemption story. And this show has tons of them. By the end of the series, countless characters discover love is more powerful than hate and forgiveness more powerful than revenge. Some had to believe they themselves could change, but there were equally as many who had to choose to believe that others could change as well. I'm not sure which is more challenging.

Is it harder for us to see our sins, our continual failings, and believe we can change? Believe we can receive a second chance?

Or is it harder to see the sins, the continual failings of another and believe they can change. To believe they deserve a second chance.

Today's passage is really part two of one of the most well-known, dramatic transformation stories in the Bible. Pastor Hannah introduced us to the first part last week in her excellent message, and I encourage you to go watch it on our website or social media channels.

A quick recap to set the stage for today: Saul (who would later become known as Paul) was a notorious headhunter of early Christians. You see, Saul was one of those bad characters in a story that even when he tried to choose good, he chose bad. He was so devoted to protecting his understanding of God against people who believed something different than him that he couldn't see God was doing a new thing – or at least couldn't see until God blinded him by a heavenly light on the road to Damascus and changed his life forever.

We pick up the story today in Damascus where Saul has been sitting in a house for three days – not eating, not drinking, his eyes covered in scales so thick he could not look anywhere other than within at his sin and his single-minded, graceless persecution of those who claimed Jesus as Lord... the same Jesus who took his vision on the road to Damascus in order that Saul's sight might truly be restored.

Let's read in Acts 9:10-12 //

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 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, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

Not much is known about Ananias from Damascus. He is only mentioned here in chapter 9 and once more in chapter 22 which I'll refer to later. What we do know from both accounts is that Ananias was a faithful disciple of Jesus. He was part of the early community of the Way, people who believed Jesus was the Son of God and were choosing to live in the ways of Jesus. It was a scary time for early believers, partly because of people like Saul. Ananias had heard the stories of Saul's hatred and punishment of those who believed in Jesus, people like Ananias and people Ananias loved. Those are Saul's true colors. Everyone knows it; well, apparently, everyone but God.

Let's read Ananias response in verses 13 and 14 //

But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind (or arrest) all who invoke your name."

Ananias' initial response to God ... "Uh, God Whoa, all due respect, I think you may be confused, so let me just recap for you who this guy is and what he's been doing and what he is here to do now. Because I'm sure when I explain things to you, we'll have a good laugh and forget about this whole Saul business."

It brings me great comfort to see Ananias' initial reaction to God is the same as mine so often when God is asking me to do something that doesn't make sense, or seems contrary to something I've come to believe or isn't something I want to do. I see what I see, forgetting that God's vision is far greater than mine.

Ananias didn't know that God was already at work in Saul's life. Saul was not the only blind man. Ananias was blind to the possibility of a man like Saul changing. He was blind to the powerful, redeeming work of God. All Ananias could see was Saul's past; God's sight was focused on Saul's future.

God isn't flustered by Ananias's response. He repeats the command and then lets Ananias in on the end game in verse 15-16.

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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

It is easy for us today to miss the second unbelievable thing God says to Ananias. Up to this point, the message of Jesus as Messiah had really stayed among the Jewish people. But God ... as we read throughout the Book of Acts ... is on the move unhindered ... pushing every geographical and social boundary. So, the idea that God chose Saul, the persecutor, blew Ananias's mind ... but then God's announcement that Saul was chosen to preach Jesus to the Gentiles would have been even more mind-blowing. Both are radical, new things God is doing, and Ananias gets the invite to be a part of both. And Ananias, in obedience and trust, says yes to the invitation.

Acts 9:17-22

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and 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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

I have often wondered about that walk from Ananias's vision and conversation with God to the house on Straight Street. Straight Street was one of the longest roads through the city of Damascus. It could have been a very long walk for Ananias – both literally and figuratively. I imagine Ananias was perhaps scared and questioning with every step if he heard correctly. Did he hesitate at all – going forward, then retreating, then starting again? Did he hem and haw, killing time at the corner convenience store? Did he tell anyone, and did they try to talk him out of it? Did he give his wife and kids an extra-long, extra tight hug just in case he didn't return?

While we don't know, we do know this: on the road to the house on Straight Street, Ananias's sight regarding Saul was restored. God changed the way Ananias thought of Saul so that by the time Ananias walked into that house and laid his hand on Saul, he was able to say in faith "My **brother** Saul". This term of acceptance made an impact on Saul. Later in Acts in chapter 22, Saul who is now known as Paul, is telling about his dramatic conversion experience where Jesus became real to him and he says in his testimony, in Acts 22:12-13 "A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well-spoken of by all the Jews living there, came to me; and standing beside me, he said, "Brother Saul, regain your sight'.

After sitting in the dark for three days, feeding on nothing but his own sin, shame, and remorse, vulnerable and dependent on others, even before his sight was restored, the first rays of light hit him in the gentle touch of a hand and the tender claim in his ear of "Brother".

The first or one of the very first things Saul saw after his sight was restored was the face of Ananias, the one who called him Brother, the one who said Yes to God's crazy request that he believe God could change a man's story, even a man like Saul, and do a new thing.

At this point Ananias fades from the story and we hear of him no more. But it is easy to imagine Ananias continued to play a role in God's mission – maybe teaching Saul as he relearned his understanding of God through the eyes of Jesus; maybe vouching to others in Damascus that indeed Saul was a changed man, transformed by Christ. This helped others to accept Saul as they began to see with new eyes. Later in chapter 9, Saul arrives in Jerusalem to a cold reception, as the disciples there did not believe he had changed. It took another disciple, Barnabas, to vouch for him, to continue to move forward God's plan to preach the gospel unhindered by Saul's past or by the lack of vision of some disciples.

In the Netflix show, *Once Upon a Time*, there were countless stories of changed lives ... changed by love, forgiveness, and grace both for themselves and for others.

Once Upon a Time there was a man named Saul, blind to his sin and hatred. Then, he met Jesus and his sight was restored; his story redeemed.

Once Upon a Time there was a man named Ananias, blinded by another's past. Then, Jesus restored his sight, and he was used by God to be part of Saul's second chance.

How is God seeking to restore your sight so Love will be unhindered in your life and the lives of others?

Could you trust that God is a God of second chances for you? I know it may be hard, but it only takes a small step of being open to the hope that nothing in your past nor your present will hinder His Love for you. I love redemption stories, but it's not even close to how much God loves them ... and how much God loves you.

And church ... what person or group of people are you so certain are beyond hope that you are blind to the work God is doing to restore them? Blind to God's invitation to you to be a part of their second chance. Blind to the invitation to be part of a new thing God is doing. Who needs a tender touch from you and to hear you call them I faith, "Brother or Sister"?

When our sight is restored through Christ, God's love will be unhindered.

Theologian Will Willimon says that this story is "a story about how God chose to move toward the Gentiles through the one whom the church feared and hated." Like Ananias, we must be ready to be surprised by God's transformation of our enemies into our brothers and sisters, so that the story of God's love can continue to spread unhindered.