

UNHINDERED: See What Love Can Do Sermon Series
“The Damascus Road” (Acts 9:1-9)
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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/unhindered-the-damascus-road/>

I wonder if you have ever found yourself on the way to do a bad thing. I can remember vividly several moments in my life when an unfamiliar rage has overtaken my brain and my body and set me on a path to do a bad thing.

One memory that comes to mind is when I was a teenager and I overheard one of my brothers, a pre-teen himself, make one more biting disrespectful comment to my mother. This one pushed me over the edge. I found his attitude and his words to be unacceptable. From the living room, I heard his comment, I stood and marched—with the zeal and self-righteousness of Saul on the Damascus road himself—down the hallway and into the kitchen where I looked my brother square in the eye and slapped him with all my might across the face.

My brother stared at me, absolutely stunned. The hard-edges and arrogance melted from my brother’s face and I saw, not the preteen young man, but the child, as crocodile tears filled his eyes. I learned that day that using power to punish and hurt was wrong. I also learned that I could be on the way to do a bad thing believing fiercely and forcefully that it was the right thing.

In our text for today, Saul is on his way to do a bad thing and he is so sure it is the right thing. Saul’s determination to root out these “followers of the Way”, is not only a matter of theology or sentiment, but a matter of his very body and soul. His hatred for these early Christians is elemental, chemical in nature, for he “breathes threats and murder”—in the Greek, Saul is literally animated by hatred. He seeks to physically destroy the early Christians, entering their homes, binding them—men and women-- and hauling them to prison.¹ Overseeing the mob death of Stephen. Saul is the religious establishment’s Chief Punishment Officer. Saul’s hatred is not a matter of thoughtless rage, it is a systematized, violent, methodical hatred composing his very identity actions, thoughts, and soul.

Like a righteous big sister marching from the living room to the kitchen to slap her brother in the face, Saul has gathered his pieces of evidence from the high priest in Jerusalem and is marching the 135 miles to Damascus with his posse to shackle and bring God’s judgment on followers of the Way there. And he is so sure that he is right.

Maybe you’ve heard this story before and, like me, seen a man who needs to be punished for his acts of punishment. What Saul needs is a good slap in the face, a swift kick in the boot. The bright flash of heavenly light striking Saul with blindness is God’s retributive justice, Saul getting what he deserves. A good three-day timeout in the dark should be sufficient punishment to bring Saul to Jesus on his knees. I’m not so sure Jesus would agree.

¹ Acts 8:3

“You have heard that it was said,” says Jesus, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you...”²

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Why does it matter how we understand Jesus’ intervention in the life of Saul? It mattered to the New Testament authors because they knew it would shape how we understand Jesus’ intervention in our lives. For the New Testament authors, it mattered very much how Jesus came to Philip, to Peter, to Saul—renamed Paul—because they knew that this is how Jesus came to them and how Jesus comes to us.

The whole point of God’s story in the scriptures, in history, in us, is that nothing can stop the gospel. Nothing can hinder transformation, redemption, the new order of the Spirit springing forth. Jesus showed his first followers, who showed the early Christians, who passed down to us the way God goes about this work.

Unhindered—see what *love* can do. How are we to understand and experience Christ’s coming in our lives?

Imagine with me for a moment that Jesus comes to Saul on the Damascus road not as the Universe’s Chief Punishment Officer, not wielding darkness and retribution, not to shackle and bind, not on the way to do a bad thing. What if Jesus comes to Saul—what if Jesus comes to us—as the Universe’s Chief Agent of Transformation? Not in darkness but in a bright flash of light? Not in retribution but in redemption?

What if Jesus unhinders the gospel not by shackling and shaming us, but by setting us free?

What Saul experiences on the Damascus road is a not merely a physical change, but a chemical change—a change in substance at the molecular, elemental level. The word Jesus uses to talk about this type of change—*metanoia*—is a fundamental transformation of the mind, soul, the body. In the same way the caterpillar receives an entirely new way of being in the world as a butterfly with a new body, new instincts, new gifts, skills, and tools, Saul is gifted with entirely new way of being in the world.

As he is on the way to do a bad thing, Jesus lovingly, tenderly, and powerfully brings a bright flash of light into Saul’s life that makes it impossible for Saul to see and to navigate the world the way he did before. This is way Jesus comes to you, my friend, lovingly, tenderly, powerfully.

The seed of hatred is sprouted in the soil of our resistance and unwillingness to be unconditionally loved. In fact, in Jesus on the cross, we see what we do to unconditional love, what we do to that which could really change us.³ Our rejection and resistance become the capacity for hating ourselves, for hating others, for violence, scapegoating, and all other forms of hatred.

² Matthew 5:38-39

³ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*, New York: Convergent, 2019, 155.

The gospel is that the power of unconditional love overcomes hate not with hate, but through suffering, vulnerability, and unremitting mercy. In the same way Jesus makes possible a new way of seeing and being in the world for Saul, Jesus makes possible a new way of seeing and being for us; a redemption from the cycle of refusing to be loved.

I got to thinking this week about Clarence Jordan. Clarence was a good farmer and brilliant Greek New Testament scholar from the state of Georgia. He loved the land and he loved Jesus. In 1942, Clarence and Florence Jordan moved from Louisville, KY back to south Georgia to found Koinonia farms with another couple.

Jordan intended for Koinonia to be a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.” The farm was an interracial community in which white and black believers lived and worked together as co-equals and co-beneficiaries. They lived the way of life described in the book of Acts.

In case you didn’t catch it before, the farm was founded in 1942 in south Georgia, more than decade before the official start of the civil rights movement. During the civil rights movement, Koinonia became a target for bombings, shootings, and menacing acts of violence and hatred. The community at Koinonia confronted hatred with their transformed, merciful, just community.

Koinonia wanted to make a difference in the area housing and started a project to build decent, affordable, homes for their neighbors. In 1965, Millard and Linda Fuller stopped by Koinonia farms, planning to visit friends for the day and ended up staying for a few years. In their time at Koinonia, they were inspired by the housing project and eventually founded an organization that might be familiar to you—Habitat for Humanity—which became the modern-day movement for affordable housing, a movement that has impact here and now even in Jefferson City, Missouri.

I think sometimes about the kind of sight, the kind of vision and imagination Christ himself must have given to Clarence Jordan to see the potential of a small plot of land, a small interracial group of folks, in south Georgia in 1942. The about the holy imagination, the elemental transformation necessary to make possible what happened at Koinonia farms in 1942, in the 1950’s, in the 1960’s all the way until today. Hatred and barriers continually overcome by the absolute freedom and love of God unhindered in the hearts, souls, and minds of one many, one family, one community.

Child of God, what bright flash of light, is stopping you in your tracks? In what way is God lovingly, tenderly, generously unhindering transformation in you? Welcoming you into the absolute freedom and love of God? ⁴ From what ways of seeing is God lovingly freeing us? To dream-- to be God’s kingdom here and now?

⁴ Ibid., 144.