

“Saul: The Original Transformer”

Neil Engle
April 22, 2007
Text: Acts: 9:1-20

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

The Virginia Tech shootings. Yet another violent event in our nation's history. Another story to define our life together. One more tragedy to wound us and gnaw at us. More lives lost – more persons for whom to grieve. We think it can't or won't happen again, but it does. And just as before it becomes difficult to stay sensitized to the suffering and death, in part because it does keep happening and because of the media saturation. Many of us find ourselves feeling great compassion for the victims and their families, but already fatigued with the continuous news coverage. The tragedy is one more occasion for us to assess the situation in hindsight. What could have been done to minimize the number of deaths? Could the tragedy have been averted all together? Why didn't someone intervene beforehand?

I struggled as I'm sure many pastors did this week, as to what should be said this morning. Does an event of this magnitude deserve to knock off the page whatever was scheduled to be preached this morning? At first, my answer was yes. But then, after reflecting upon the scripture for today, I changed my mind. For the text from the book of Acts tells of a man who was knee deep in evil, who was calculating, who was involved in persecution of the innocent and who had blood on his hands.

Whereas the Virginia Tech killer, Cho, was obviously deeply deeply disturbed, the man in our scripture passage, Saul, persecuted Christ and His church out of his deep conviction that he was doing God's will. Saul is dangerous, and what makes him dangerous, is that he knows he's absolutely right and he knows that his will is God's will. And so, in his self-righteous zeal, he is out to do God's will by destroying the church of Jesus Christ, no matter who suffers, no matter who dies.

Now as the author of the book of Acts, Luke has only slightly foreshadowed his readers' knowledge of this man Saul. He is first mentioned in chapter 7 – at the scene of Stephen's martyrdom. While apparently he does not physically participate in the stoning, Saul holds the coats of those who do. Immediately after Stephen's murder, a period of widespread persecution against the church begins; Saul, in chapter 8, is portrayed as a zealous participant in that activity.

Although he is consumed with hatred and rage against the preachers and practitioners of “the way,” Saul's legal training cautions and contains his actions, enabling him to carefully calculate how he may best destroy these followers of Jesus. Instead of looking for easy targets upon which to practice vigilante justice – like this week's shooter did – Saul goes before the high priest to petition for letters of authority which would serve as blank arrest warrants.

Only the officially recognized Jewish council had permission from the Roman legal authorities to extend such documents. This power was one Rome continued to allow the Jews, fostering the illusion that the Jews still maintained a semblance of self-governing power. Armed with the proper papers, the letter-of-the-law-abiding Saul could wield genuine authority within not just the homes, but the synagogues of other Jews. Any and all Saul viewed as suspect could be legally apprehended and brought to Jerusalem to stand trial before the high priest and council. As was shown at Jesus' trial, Jewish leaders could then hand troublemakers over to the Roman authorities – and let the violent justice of the Roman state take its course.

Our text for today tells us that Saul is breathing threats and murder against the disciples. He's on his way to Damascus, and remember, he is blind to the possibility that his will may not be God's will. Saul doesn't ever fall to his knees to pray, “Lord not my will but thy will be done.” No, if Saul is going to fall to his knees, he's going to have to be driven to his knees. And that's exactly what happens in his encounter with the risen Christ. Christ goes to meet Saul as he's on his way to do his self-righteous business, and knock him down with a blinding light.

And why? Does Christ do it to punish him? To terminate him? No, the risen Christ comes to this self-righteous, murderous, threat-breathing fanatic to – believe it or not – give him a new beginning, a new start. He blinds him only to help him see like he's never seen before – to see who Jesus really is – to see what God's will really is. And you know the rest of the story. With help from Ananias Saul is given a new start, a new vision, a new name, becoming the Apostle Paul proclaiming the Gospel from Damascus to Rome. Saul is transformed into Paul.

Now I don't know about you, but when I read or hear this text, I experience a little distance with it – maybe that's reflected in the fact that I rarely preach on this text. The distance is due to a couple of things. First, it's difficult for me to embrace this story because it's simply not my experience. The closest thing I've had to a light from heaven flashing around me was a bolt of lightning and that wasn't that close. I've never heard the voice of Christ say, "Neil, Neil," in a clear audible voice. The most I can testify to is being able to discern what I thought was God whispering. And as for being left blind for three days, well, I'm afraid that having temporary sight problems when having my eyes dilated during an exam just doesn't measure up. You see, my faith journey didn't begin with a flash or in a flash. It was just always there. I was always there in church.

My faith wasn't caught – it was taught. When it comes to spiritual growth, I haven't thrown any 80 yard passes – I'm normally trying to grind it out a few yards at a time, and sometimes I get thrown for a loss. Maybe you can testify to a dramatic one time conversion experience like Saul's – but I can't, and that's one reason this text is not easy to embrace. The other reason I feel distance with this story is based upon what I observe when it comes to people and change.

Most of us doubt we can really change. After all, we're not transformers – you know those toys that came out about 20 years ago – those "robots in disguise" that transform immediately – rearranging their bodies into a common and innocuous form such as a car, aircraft or animal. That kind of instant change works for the Autobots and Decepticons from the planet Cybertron (and for Saul), but not for us. Most of us know what an uphill battle it is to make positive changes in our lives. As someone said, "Everybody is in favor of progress. It's the change they don't like." Someone else said, "The only change everyone likes is the kind that jiggles in their pockets." We know change is difficult and we sometimes wonder whether God can really change us, or why God would even bother with us.

I read a story this past week of a seminary admissions committee:

They turned this student down, a student who obviously had few academic qualifications for theological study. But he wrote them from his jail cell to tell them that the parole board would let him out if they let him in. They invited him to plead his case before them[, so] this big guy came in and told them that, as a young teenager, he had held up a convenience store. All he remembered was brandishing this unloaded gun at the clerk, an off duty policeman spotted him, shots rang out. Then, before the oak table of the seminary admissions committee, he pulls up his shirt to show them where the policeman's bullet got him in the gut, went out the other side. "That was my Damascus Road, my burning bush!" he exclaimed.

A professor on the committee said, "Of course we didn't want to admit him into seminary. But what could we do? We knew Acts 9!" If God could make an apostle out of Saul the murderer, what might God do with a guy like this?

And listen to a Duke Divinity School professor tell of an encounter he had with a young man.

I met him his sophomore year, when he arrived at Duke as a transfer study. He was in the Chapel on most Sundays. One day in the fall, I took him home with me for a sandwich. As we sat there eating, he said, "I want to tell you something about me so you can know me a little better."

OK.

"Well, first I was a teenager from hell. I made my folks' lives miserable," he said.

I said that was a not too original story around here.

He continued, "They had me committed to a mental institution when I was sixteen. But I escaped from there, made my way to Chicago, worked as a prostitute on the streets. Got into lots of stuff. One night I rolled this guy, took his wallet and used his American Express card to buy some stuff."

"Wow," I said. "I thought you meant that you got a speeding ticket in high school."

"I told you I was bad," he said. "Anyway, cops got me. I was sent to Joliet prison. That was like entering the depths of hell. This older prisoner took me under his wing to protect me. Every night, before lock down, he would read a chapter out of the Bible to me, out of the gospel of Luke. He wasn't too good a reader, so it would take him forever, stumbling over the

words and stuff. Well, one night he was reading Luke, about the middle, the stories about the lost sheep, and the prodigal son, and all, and it was like this hand just reached in that cell, grabbed me by the throat, shook me up and down and said, 'I've got plans for you!' Well, I got saved. I got out of that prison in a few months, finished my high school degree, and I'm here on a full scholarship."

"Wow," I said. "We don't hear stories like that around here too often."

"Well," he continued, "the reason I'm telling you this is that you're a preacher, right? And I know you guys are always grubbing around for stories, illustrations and stuff. And you got Easter coming up in a few weeks. Well, I am your proof of Easter."

Let us pray: God, most of us aren't on a road to Damascus and destruction, but we know we need to make some changes in our lives. We want to be transformed – we want to be made new creatures in Christ. We know that you have the power and the will to do that with us and for us if we call upon you. Remind us that we are never beyond Your grace or Your ability to change us, for we believe what Martin Luther said – that You can carve the rotten wood and ride the lame horse. In the name of the one whom you transformed from death to life, Jesus Christ. Amen.