

Loving Your Enemies 4: Repentance and Trust

Acts 9:1-19

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This is the fourth week in a four week series on Jesus teaching to Love our Enemies. After reading Jesus' teaching to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, we read two surprising stories about enemies. First a story of a Roman centurion who surprises us by showing that he is a human being after all, and second a story where Jesus associates with enemies, tax collectors, for the sake of transformation in their lives.

We've been sitting with these teachings because we are living with deep divisions. I was in a meeting this week where the director of ISAIAH MN Doran Schranz said that she thinks we haven't been this divided as a nation since the civil war. This is a dramatic statement, but you can make a case for it.

One story I was paying attention to this week, as I was thinking about our topic was the story of NFL players kneeling during the national anthem. This national conversation, of course, is about race.

In case you missed it, or as a matter of principle you avoid professional football, I'll explain. In preseason last year a quarterback named Colin Kaepernick stopped participating in the national anthem ceremony. He sat on the bench while everyone else stood and lined up for the national anthem. He has an interesting story. His biological father is African American, his mom is white, he was adopted by white parents. He has lived at this intersection of race in the U.S. his whole life. Last season he sported a nice, big afro. He sat on the bench. He said, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color..." "To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." As the season progressed, he knelt during the national anthem and a few other players around the league joined him in protest. This stirred up some controversy. Over the summer, no team would hire Kaepernick he still is without a team, including our own Vikings, because even though he is a very good quarterback, and many

sports writers, he is controversial and bad for business. Then last weekend President Trump started tweeting that players who kneel for the national anthem should be fired, and last Sunday players and owners across the NFL joined in a protest in response to the president, kneeling and locking arms and even staying in the locker room during the national anthem. Everyone was talking about this. My children were talking about it in class, and at home, it was all over social media in some ugly ways. But the interaction I've thinking about was with a friend of mine who is a person of color, military background, and a football fan. He said to me, "I'm surprised by the people I know, who should know better, who don't think there is any validity to the protest." I could hear disappointment and fatigue in his voice.

I find myself, and I think many of us are longing for stories that provide hope. Stories that help us imagine that our life together can be different than this. Part of what is powerful about our faith, part of what I want to share with others is that we have stories in our scriptures that can break open our ideas about what is possible for our lives together, helping us imagine something new.

The story of Saul and the early church community is one of those stories for me.

Not only can this story help us imagine something else, this story shows us the ingredients that are needed for reconciliation. This story helps us imagine and it also guides the way for us.

Saul is a Pharisee, a Jew, who is persecuting the early church, comprised of other Jews who believed that Jesus had been made Messiah for Jews and for non-Jews too, Gentiles. This was the radical move. Saul doesn't like this. The story begins that Saul is still breathing threats and murder against the disciples. In a previous story the disciple Stephen has been killed and Saul approves of his death. This is as serious as it gets.

Saul has an experience of the Risen Jesus on the road and it transforms his life. He receives a call to turn from violence and to be a Jew on a different path, toward the Gentiles. It transforms his life in a similar way that the tax collector Levi's life was transformed last week. Levi was cheating people, and he stops and starts following the path of loving the neighbor. Saul was harming people, and he stops and starts following the path of loving the neighbor.

It is important to notice that there's repentance in this story of Saul. Repentance is about much more than feeling sad. Repentance literally means "to turn," to turn your life around. Repentance is about different behavior. Saul's not repenting from Judaism, he is still a Jew. He is repenting from a life of threatening people.

Also important to notice is that there is a power gap in this story. Saul is the powerful one. And the powerful one is the one who repents. The powerful one says, "I'm going to stop doing violence." This is critical for reconciliation.

The other key to this story. There are a few people in the community willing to give Saul a small chance. Ananias is willing to meet Saul, even though he is dangerous. Then the community lets him stay with them for a few days. As the story unfolds, trust builds. Saul is integrated into the life of the early church community, and he becomes a leader in reaching out to the Gentiles. But the repentance has to stay, Saul, the powerful one, has to keep showing that he will keep behaving differently, or the trust will disappear.

This story of the early church loving their enemy Saul, starts with the grace of God nudging Saul and Saul, repents. It continues, because thanks to the nudge of God, a few people are willing to trust Saul. The story continues beyond that because Saul's repentance continues, and trust deepens. Without Saul's continued change in behavior, the trust would fall apart and the relationship wouldn't hold. But we are all here as the church, because something like this story and this kind of reconciliation happened. We are possible because this reconciliation was possible.

As we think about loving our enemies and steps towards reconciliation, healing our divisions, there will have to be repentance, there will have to be changes in behavior. There will have to be repentance of powerful ones, and there will have to be a willingness to take the risk of relationship. But the changes in behavior must be sustained for trust to deepen and for the relationship to hold.

A couple of summers ago at the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ, our presenter was Jennifer Harvey, a religion professor at Drake University in Des Moines. She has a book titled, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing*

for Racial Reconciliation. Her premise is that the parts of the mainline Protestant church have focused on racial reconciliation since the civil rights movement, but we haven't progressed as far as we wanted to. Our churches are still divided by race and race based resentment seems to be deepening. This suggests to her that racial reconciliation is too far away for us to focus on it. What we need to do instead is focus on repentance. It is only with repentance she suggests, changes in behavior, that we will be able to take helpful steps forward. Her logic follows the pattern of our story from Saul.

What I hear in the NFL protests is a call from people of color to white people in power, to change behavior. To accept that overt racism persists in our country and implicit bias is under the surface and to do something to prevent the deaths of innocent people of color. Until that is seen, no trust will be built and we will not take steps towards reconciliation.

The starting point for us may be as simple as conversations and listening, not just in relation to race but wherever we are divided and in conflict.

I was in a meeting this week where an African American clergy person said, "some of the most powerful experiences I've had have been in conversations with a white person who disagrees with me, but I know I'm being heard and we can have a conversation."

There is something powerful about listening, noticing, hearing someone, especially across a power difference that builds trust. For people who are powerful to be listening right now is repentance, that is different behavior. And it builds trust. If we can build enough trust we can start to see possibilities for life that is not just on our own, but life together.

We remember and celebrate that there is a love in our midst that can change things, this love can create something new for us together. God is in this love, pulling us towards a different future.

May God grant us the grace we need for this journey.