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Acts 9: 1-19
Changing our Minds and Trusting
Lent 3

Recently Sara and I watched a series of PBS specials on the First Ladies of the United States. This was Sara's pick, she was evening things out after the baseball documentary.

My favorite was a story of Dolly Madison, wife of our fourth president James Madison. One of the challenges of Madison's presidency was that congress had not figured out how to make the country function. Foreign policy, taxes, states rights were all deeply divisive issues, which means that representatives were beating each other with canes on the floor of the House, and duels between representatives happened every day.

Dolly Madison noticed that since Washington D.C. was a new town, there were no good places for people to meet socially. So she decided to host parties at the Executive Mansion every Wednesday afternoon. She served ice cream – nothing makes a party quite like ice cream. The parties were so popular people called them “squeezes,” because so many people were squeezed into the executive mansion. Isn't that cute. “My dear sir, are you going to squeeze on Wednesday?”

But the squeezes weren't just parties. Dolly was also intentionally bringing together people who didn't like each other, who didn't trust each other, who didn't want to get to know or even meet each other. When a member of the House or Senate said particularly awful things about her husband on the House or Senate floor, Dolly would find them at the next squeeze, she would charm them and offer them ice cream and then guide them by the hand from one room to another until surprise, surprise they just happened to run into her husband, and then she would invite these political rivals into conversation.

At the squeezes people were taking risks. It is a risk to engage with someone you don't like, someone you don't trust, someone who has hurt you in the past. These political enemies were taking the risk of seeing humanity in their political foes. That is a risk because if you do that you will likely learn something new that will soften you and you will change your perspective and maybe even your mind.

Today's story of Saul and Ananias is another story of enemies coming together. Thanks to the presence of the Risen Christ they make it through the wilderness and they share to reconciliation. But, they both have work to do, and maybe we can learn something from them that will help us through wildernesses we're living through in our relationships' personal risks. Ananias doesn't like Saul, doesn't trust him, doesn't want to be anywhere near him.

We're telling Biblical wilderness stories during Lent, looking for clues that will help us through our own wilderness times. We started with Deuteronomy 26 which instructed us to come out of isolation and practice our story of God, "God hears our cries and God helps us find our way out of the wilderness." Last week we told the story of Ruth which tells us how to help others through the wilderness: we simply need to be present with them, with our whole selves. And today we spend time with Saul and Ananias.

To set the stage for the Biblical story, Jesus has been crucified, the disciples are having experiences of the Risen Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is empowering them to share the news that Jesus is alive, that Jesus the Messiah and God's cleanup of the world is beginning. Not many Jews agree with these disciples, and a debate within Judaism is intensifying. There are many groups within Judaism: Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, and the Jesus people, those who belonged to the Way among others. And there's disagreement among these groups on what is true Judaism.

Saul is a Pharisee. The story in Acts says he's breathing threats and murder against the disciples of Jesus, and asking if he can deliver the mail to the synagogue in Damascus, so that he can sniff out Jesus' people and bring them bound to Jerusalem. In the letters to Saul, also known as Paul (this is the guy who writes Romans, I and II Corinthians and other letters), makes clear that he persecuted the followers of Jesus in the past, but there's no mention of anything close to torture and death. It's likely that the writer of Acts is jazzing this story up a bit for dramatic effect.

Saul's on his way to Damascus, to find those squirrely followers of Jesus, and suddenly he has an experience of the Risen Christ, just like those followers of Jesus keep talking about. Now, thanks to the Risen Christ, Saul suddenly has a window into the experience of his enemies. Jesus asks Saul, "Why are you persecuting me?" Saul doesn't have a good answer. So, Jesus tells Saul to go to into Damascus and wait for instruction. Saul finds he can't see. To me this has a deeper meaning than just physical sight. When we have those moments where we suddenly understand the point of view of someone we're fighting with, or there's someone that we look down on or we just never knew existed and we realize that they are human just like us, these experiences mess with our minds. We won't know which way is up. We won't be able to see what is right. So he sits in Damascus for three days, not eating, not drinking, searching his soul, unable to see.

Now Jesus appears to a member of the Way named Ananias. Jesus says to Ananias, "Go to the street called straight and in the house of Judas, there you will see Saul of Tarsus and I want you to lay your hands on him so that he will regain his sight." And Ananias responds, "Jesus, are you sure about this? Saul is our enemy; he has hurt us." And Jesus replies, "Yep, I'm sure. I have work for Saul to do. Go to him."

And Ananias goes to this person he doesn't trust, to this person he doesn't want to meet. But deep down I think Ananias knows that for the world to heal at all, someone has to show love to the enemy. Deep down I think Ananias knows that for wars to stop, someone has to put their guard down, and extend an olive branch. The Risen Christ calls to Ananias and Ananias, like the acrobat on our bulletin today, takes a flying leap.

Ananias reaches out when he doesn't have to, when he doesn't want to, and he offers love. And Saul changes his mind when no one thought he would or could. He doesn't ignore the experience of his enemy, but welcomes it into himself, he allows it to completely mess up his mind. He sits for three days, unable to see straight, not knowing what the world has come to, and then an enemy shows him love and he changes his mind.

This is how we make it through our shared wildernesses. Both things have to happen. Someone has to reach out in love when they don't want to. And another has to step into the shoes of the other and then change their mind. Christ will encourage us to do this, to help us through the wilderness. Thanks be to God. Amen.