

Our Neighbors – The Saints
Acts 9: 1 – 22
First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart
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May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

I bet Saul, better known by his Roman name Paul, never could have imagined an American city being named after him. I imagine the early Christians persecuted by Paul would not have imagined it either. But here we are in 2020 in close range to a twin city named after an unlikely saint.

Saul was not acting like someone who was looking to be nominated to sainthood. In the book of Acts, we hear about him behaving in dreadful ways. He beat up on early Christians all in the service of religious purity. Saul was protecting the status quo of Temple worship and practices and these new followers of Jesus' way were practicing their faith in public, in homes and feeding the least and lost. He had the best of intentions, but his persecution put people at risk of even death. That we revere him today and that more than half of our New Testament in the Bible is made up of letters that he penned, would have shocked our early Christian ancestors. Most of the stories of saints are unlikely. That we remember some of these people dubbed saints at all is a miracle. Mary Luti writes this about saints, "The saints are indeed wonderful, but they weren't born wonderful. They worked out their salvation in fear and trembling. If we imitate them, it's that "working out" that we imitate. It's one of the most encouraging things about them. Living in communion with the saints we see how God's power really is manifest in weakness... God's power shone brightest in these sinful people who knew they depended on mercy for everything.¹

What do learn from Saul's soul work that is worth imitating? The first thing to note is that Saul is called out by Jesus for his behavior. A life-twisting question falls on his ears – why are you fighting me? Saul was struck with blindness on the road to Damascus, and even though he could not see after Jesus calls him out, his "eyes" were opened. We will never know if some part of Saul was already open to being changed by God. He had to have hated his life in some way, but he needed God's power to shake free of his past. And while his eyes were opened and he confesses belief, it took some partnership for the scales to completely fall from his eyes. Enter Ah-nay-nee-us or as more commonly called Ananias. There are two people who are converted in this story – everyone gets to grow and change.

The most unlikely people may have something to offer us on our life journey. Ananias certainly pushes back on God's command to receive Saul. Poor Ananias was afraid of Saul, and why wouldn't he be? He does what any good prophet does and says, are you out of your mind God? God instructed Ananias to meet with Saul anyway, and Ananias healed him and presumably baptized him as well. No conversion or change of heart is private. Matt Skinner in a Luther Seminary podcast states, "Christian witness is always about the business of having your perspective re-oriented. 2

This came home to me most poignantly in an article entitled "A liberal daughter discusses White privilege with her conservative Dad." 3 The author asks the question – what would happen if we listened to each other in love? She recounts a phone conversation with her Dad where she reports to him that she has received her first book contract. Rev. Teri Ott records the conversation this way, "That's great he said. What's the book about?" Sheepishly, I responded, "Well, it's called Ten Risks Privileged People Should Take." "Just so you know," he said, "I

¹ Mary Luti, [Sicut Locutus Est blog](#), November 2019

² Matt Skinner, [Sermon Brainwave](#), April 2019

³ Teri McDowell Ott, [Christian Century](#), October 27, 2020

would not buy a book with that title.” He launched into an explanation of why, in his view, privilege does not exist. She goes on, “As usual I cut him off. “Well, the book’s not for you. It’s not for people who voted for Trump! It’s for people who actually want to do some good in the world!” They ended the call in a huff.

Perhaps you, like me, can relate to a conversation like this? She went on to detail her conviction to be unsatisfied with avoidance and try to do better. She asked her dad if they could have a real conversation. And they did, with some depth. She learns about his banking practices in Detroit that helped devastated black neighborhoods and he learned about her ministry and commitments. Rev. Ott shared her conviction to stay in the conversation and not choose safety and sameness over difference and diversity. It does not solve everything, nor does it heal the divisions so prevalent in our land. But in that one relationship, in those two souls, everyone gets to grow and change.

I wonder, for some of you who have been phone-banking leading up the election, possibly talking with people whose world view diverges from your own, what you have learned about how God works in the world? I wonder what you have learned about yourself in the dialogue. As in the unlikely meeting of Saul and Ananias we have to be brought together, we have to be in proximity whether on Zoom, or phone or in whatever ways we can safely be in a pandemic to affect the kind of change that sticks and that has staying power beyond the encounter.

We can be sure that this is the way God works in our lives – by bringing people into closer vicinity to us or pushing us into the path of another to change and grow. We can anticipate that God will ask us to do difficult things and go to unexpected places. This means we cannot exclude our supposed enemies from somehow changing us. Like Saul and Ananias, perhaps some of the saints we will name today, we need to stay curious – wondering – what are you up to here God?

It helps me to remember too – that these stories were told to a church that was newly being born. While we might find encouragement thinking about this personally, we cannot forget the corporate dimension of Saul and Ananias’ call. In this time of transition, to what communities is First UCC being called to be in greater proximity? What saints await our unlikely partnership, our healing effort, our accomplice work of love? It is highly likely that God will take our corporate and individual "no way," and our "we've never done that before" and transform them into "yes." Like Saul's and Ananias' new vision, God rearranges our ways of seeing, being, and acting. God rocks our world and re-orient's our perspective. And for that life-changing work we say, thanks be to God! Amen.