23rd Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

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*Acts 9:1-19*

 *Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

 *Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

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 So, last week’s sermon came easily to me. I had been mulling it over for months, actually, and when it came time to put finger to keyboard last week, the words flowed quite easily. This week? Not so much. As many of you know, my schedule has been interrupted quite a bit the past week or two with Tricia’s illness. I continue to be grateful for the hospitality of this congregation: for the flowers, cards, meals, and prayers. When I finally found some time to write this sermon on Thursday morning, I felt stuck. I’ve been there before many times; all of us who write as part of our professions know the feeling. And one of my ways to mitigate writers’ block is to get up and walk around, sometimes in the sanctuary. I’ll roam the pews and the aisles, sometimes sitting at the piano or the organ to diddle around a little bit to get the creative juices flowing. This week, I spent some time in prayerful silence walking around and noticing all the details of this holy space that is still quite new to me. Funny story: I spent five minutes last week trying to find the light switch to turn off the three lights in the rear ceiling of the sanctuary before I realized that they were skylights! Anyways, as I was walking around the sanctuary, my eyes were drawn to the beautiful stained glass above us, with 12 squares depicting the disciples. All of them had conversion experiences, each of them transformed from what they were to who God was calling them to be. But none of them had a conversion experience as dramatic as the one on the lower right corner: Paul.

 Or Saul, as he was known before being renamed to signify his conversion in today’s Gospel text. On the cover of your bulletin you’ll see a piece of artwork by a colleague of mine, the Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. It’s called “Restored” and it’s one of my favorite depictions of today’s story from the Book of Acts. I invite you to gaze upon this beautiful piece of artwork for a moment as I commend to you these words from the artist about it:

 *Saul doesn’t just persecute Jesus’ followers, he breathes threats and murder. His hatred fumes out of him like fire, perhaps a fire tended by fear—fear that his Jewish tradition will become impure or distorted, fear that the walls he’s built around who’s in and out will crumble, fear that his own hard-earned piety will diminish. He’s a force of terror, sculpted by self-sufficiency and self-righteousness. He’s a religious extremist not so unlike the ones we know of today.*

 *Until God smacks him down, pulling his sight and self-reliance out from under him like a rug. God softens Saul’s steely heart by forcing him to confront those whom he harms, and by making him utterly dependent on relationship and others to survive. Perhaps Saul’s conversion is ultimately a radical healing—God soothes his fear and hatred with empathy and intimacy.*

 *But this isn’t just a story about Saul’s transformation. His companions on the road to Damascus are changed too, as they hear the voice of the risen Christ and escort a stumbling Saul to the city. Ananias’ conversion is the most courageous of them all. He risks everything, including his own life, to come close to one with the power to have him stoned. Only in the moments when Ananias’ fingers touch Saul’s eyes, does Saul see, for the first time, the image of the divine in one who is not his enemy, but his brother.*

 *In this image, a halo hovers around the hand of Ananias, nodding to the sacred courage required to melt the hatred of his oppressor with intimacy and connection. Scales pour out of Saul’s eyes, purging him, cleansing him, igniting him with a new and particular mission: to pour out God’s grace wherever humans try to limit it.[[1]](#footnote-2)*

So, for today’s sermon, I want to focus on the owner of the hands that are reaching for Saul. I want to turn our attention to what Lisle Gwynn Garrity calls “the sacred courage” that Ananias practiced, a form of both forgiveness and blessing, upon his enemy-turned-brother, Saul.

 We don’t know a whole lot about Ananias. And it should also be noted that there are three different persons in the Book of Acts who go by that name. One was a man who, with his wife, lied about the amount of money he gave to the early Christian community and dropped dead as a result (in chapter 5). Another Ananias was a high priest, a Sadducee, that appears in Acts chapter 23. But the Ananias in today’s passage is, we’re told, a devout man who was well-respected by the members of the early Church. He lived in Damascus in modern-day Syria, but we don’t believe that he was from there. Instead, we believe that he was originally from Jerusalem but fled to Damascus as a refugee to escape the persecutions done by none other than the man that his hand is reaching for in the artwork on the front of your bulletin.

 In today’s passage, most people focus on the conversion of Saul; but I like to think that this story actually has *two* conversations: that of Saul *and* that of Ananias. If we pay particularly attention to the text, then we’ll note that Ananias has a change of heart as well. Initially, and with good reason, Ananias balks when Jesus commands him to bless Saul so that he may regain his sight. The “Stephen Fearing” translation of Ananias’ response to Jesus goes something like this: “Jesus, have you lost your gosh-darn mind?! That monster is the reason my family was forced to flee our home and live our lives as refugees! And you want me to *help* him?” But Ananias’ incredulity is short-lived. After Jesus reiterates his assignment, Ananias dutifully obeys. You see, he has no scales on his eyes; his initial reaction (and who among us wouldn’t react the same way!) was quickly tempered and corrected by his spiritual imagination, leaving room for growth, and change, and new things. Ananias’ obedience is fueled by the sentiment of the poet’s words in Isaiah 43:

*Do not remember the former things;
 or consider the things of old.
 I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

 And so, Ananias does not remember the former things and leans into the new thing that is springing forth, a new assignment to show mercy to someone who has harmed him and those he loves.

 So I want to draw us to a particular moment in today’s story. Last week, the particular moment we explored was the moment (two moments, actually) when Jesus kneeled down and doodled in the sand. We learned that that particular moment invoked silence in a tense situation and drew the onlookers’ attention to each other, rather than the woman who had been used as a pawn for the religious leaders to score some points in an argument. The particular moment I want to draw our attention to today is the moment captured in the artwork on the front of the bulletin; the moment when Ananias reaches for Saul in his moment of incredible vulnerability.

 In that moment, Saul had never been more vulnerable. Before this dramatic story, he was the architect of his own destiny (or so he thought). He was the one calling the shots. He was the one exerting power over others; using it to oppress a burgeoning community of people. He was in the drivers seat.

 But Jesus changed all of that. Truth be told, that’s often the reason that many of us resist conversion experiences, because they take us out of the driver seat, they force us to leave behind something and take on something new, something foreign, something different. Jesus, literally, brings Saul to his knees and takes away his sight. In a dramatic and sudden fashion, Saul goes from the driver’s seat to the back seat, blinded and forced to be led to Damascus to appear before a member of the very community he has acted so very violently toward.

 Now look back at that hand on the cover of your bulletin. That hand, the hand of Ananias, could do so many things. It could have struck Saul. It could have strangled him. It could have evened the scales and returned the violence that Saul had caused against so many of the people that Ananias loved.

 But it doesn’t. Ananias’ hand doesn’t bludgeon; it blesses. The position of the fingers in Lisle Gwynn Garrity’s depiction of this particular moment reveals Ananias’ intent. The position of the fingers is a classical posture in which the thumb, index finger, and middle finger form a trinitarian symbol. It’s common gesture of blessing by clergy over the millennia.

 In a moment where Ananias could have easily sought revenge; he responds to violence with non-violence. But how did he do that? How did he have that restraint, that self-discipline? How, in that moment when he could have destroyed his enemy, did he respond in a way that not only saved Saul’s life, but transformed it?

 One of my personal sources of inspiration is the late, great U.S. Representative John Lewis, an iconic civil rights leader who, among many other things, led the marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in 1965. But before that, John Lewis was part of the lunch counter sit-in movement that has roots right down the road from where we sit this morning down on Elm Street.

 In his memoir, *Walking With the Wind*, Lewis details the intensive training that he and the other members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee underwent to prepare for these sit-ins, particularly the work they did to prepare themselves to respond non-violently to violence. Lewis wrote the following about how this approach works:

 “*One method of practicing [nonviolence], when faced with a hateful, angry, aggressive, even despicable person, is to imagine that person - actually* visualize *him or her - as an infant, as a baby. If you can see this full-grown attacker who faces you as the pure, innocent child that he or she once was - that we* all *once were - it is not hard to find compassion in your heart. It is not hard to find forgiveness. And this…is at the essence of the nonviolent way of life - the capacity to forgive. When you can truly understand and* feel*, even as a person is cursing you to your face, even as he is spitting on you, or pushing a lit cigarette into your neck, or beating you with a truncheon - if you can understand and feel even in the midst of those critical and often physically painful moments that your attacker is as much a victim as you are, that he is a victim of the forces that have shaped and fed his anger and fury, then you are well on your way to the nonviolent life.”[[2]](#footnote-3)*

Seeing the child. That’s our job. When we are tempted to vilify the other person, even the person who has wronged us, Christ compels us to see the humanity - the beloved child of God - that resides within that person no less than it resides within us. Forgiving is transformative and helps us become the Beloved Community that God is calling us to be.

 Now, here is always an important pastoral note: forgiveness, even the radical forgiveness John Lewis talks of in this passage, does not mean that we don’t hold each other accountable for harmful behavior. Any theology that uses radical forgiveness as a way to perpetuate systems of oppression or violence isn’t based in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But if we are able to harness that sort of self-discipline that it takes to refrain from responding to violence - of any sort - with violence, then we are well on our way to understanding how Ananias could use his hands to bless instead of to beat. Such is the beginning of the nonviolent life and such is the mandate of any Gospel life rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ.

 And seeing the child in the other person - whether they are doing something as physically hurtful as putting out their cigarette on the back of your neck or something as emotionally hurtful as dehumanizing you because you voted for the other guy - takes two things.

 First of all, it takes practice. Lot’s of it.

 Secondly, it takes a village.

 John Lewis and the rest of his fellow nonviolent protestors knew that they weren’t alone. They were in this together. And so are we, in God’s name. Together, let’s see the child in each other. That’s another beautiful way to *be* the argument.

 In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**

1. By Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, from A Sanctified Art’s *Unraveled* series. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*. Page 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)