

Acts 9: 1-19

"Gifted By God"

Charlie Brown was having a really bad day and so he was relieved to see that Lucy had her sign up, "The psychiatrist is In, 5 cents an hour." Would that they only cost that much, then maybe more of us would use them. Anyway, Charlie Brown said, "Lucy, I'm just feeling blue. I don't think I really understand the meaning of life."

"Charlie Brown," Lucy began, "life is like a cruise ship. Some people take their deck chairs and sit on the back of the ship, the stern, so they can look backwards and see where they have been. But other people like to take their deck chairs and sit on the front of the ship, the bow, and look forward to where they will be going. What kind of cruise ship passenger do you think YOU are, Charlie Brown?" After some thought, Charlie Brown said, "Lucy, I've never even figured out how to get the darn chair unfolded!"

God's chosen people, the Jews, had a habit of looking back. If you asked any Jew, even today, to tell you what THE defining moment in their history is they will IMMEDIATELY say, "We were in bondage in Egypt and the Lord heard our cries and delivered us out of the hand of the Pharaoh and into the Promised Land." The Exodus is STILL what they hold onto as their history, their meaning – even their Easter if I may be so bold as to interpret it that way.

But as followers of the risen Christ, those Jews who had become members of the new church in the book of Acts were called to look forward. And while remembering *is* comforting and a necessary and very important part of who we are, in order to "be the church" today I believe this morning's message in Acts encourages us to look forward as well.

While this passage is commonly referred to as the "conversion of Saul" it is actually one of a series of conversion stories recorded in Acts and this particular passage also includes the conversion of Ananias. But really these stories are about call. And "call" is such a misunderstood word. However, I would like us to consider God's call at Nazareth as we seek to be the church that God intends for us to be.

Many folks assume that one is only called to mission work or ordained ministry. But every person in this sanctuary is called by God to do something that only *you* can do just the way *you* do it for God's kingdom. Some of us are called to be nurses or teachers or soccer coaches or engineers or housewives. But since being called is about all areas of life, call does not just refer to our "vocation". Some of us are called to be really good listeners or to work with youth or to visit the elderly, even if we spend most of our time "working" in another way.

In fact, "the Greek word for 'called', *klesis* is a rich term that showcases God's unswerving delight, unconditional love, and unyielding power to forgive. Given this definition, we are ALL called—called by God's scandalous grace to unleash our Spirit-given gifts in all areas of life." (1)

When I entered Seminary at the age of 34, I had a husband, and two children ages 5 and 9. When I had to go before the Committee in our Presbytery that would be overseeing the Ordination Process for me, I told them that, while I *knew* I was called to ministry, I felt called to be a wife and mother first. And therefore, family would be my first priority. And since we were all honoring God's call, then God worked everything out just that way.

So let's consider this morning three important elements of being called, both as individuals and as the body of Christ. The second element is to discern what we are being called "to". Paul was called to be a light to the Gentiles. To take the teachings of the risen Christ

specifically to those who were considered outside the Jewish faith. Ananias was called to be the instrument that helped Paul understand his call. You see, Saul, as he was then known as, had been a fiercely outspoken persecutor of the early church. He had condoned the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian faith. And as Luke recorded in our passage today, Paul was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."

But Paul was called to look forward, as I believe we are. And since Paul's experience with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus did not occur during the 40 days when the risen Lord was on earth, Paul could not look back to the proof of Christ's resurrection. He was not among those who witnessed it. He would have to consider NEW beliefs and practices. Paul's only encounter with Christ had happened in the present and was witnessed only by him. Therefore he could only look forward to what he was being called to do and how God was preparing to use him.

And with regards to his past, God was making it clear that Paul's education, leadership and background were going to be used in a different way. Previously, his credentials serve as a deterrent to the disciples' work, as one who was learned and respected for his beliefs. But God was calling Paul to use his position to admit that he was wrong! Because when people saw and heard Paul, who was so knowledgeable in the ways of Judaism, actively witnessing to the Gentiles they would really take note. As a member of Pharisees, Paul would have believed that this was strictly forbidden so his radical change of heart would make him an even more credible witness. And his encounter with God calls Nazareth to look to the future for the understanding of what we are called to do.

This leads to the third element of being called. The truth is that very few people have a road to Damascus experience, a dramatic event that leaves us completely in awe. But because

God's grace is so scandalous, the change in our lives and our response to his call will most likely be scandalous as well. The truth is that being called is an uncomfortable thing. Because it usually means doing something different and let's face it friends, nobody likes change but a wet baby!

Now Paul's call involved not only a good amount of radical change but also an element of repentance, and it has been my experience that this holds true for us all. One such story comes to mind about a girl I knew in college. This particular girl was in my sorority and I guess she was what you would call the "life of the party". She could be counted on to show up at every fraternity mixer, to lead the pack on every road trip and to tell the wildest jokes. She also loved to take a dare – especially one that started with "No GIRL could ever do this!"

She came from a good Christian home. In fact, she went home almost every Sunday just to go to church, but almost no one knew THAT about her. Her forte was FUN and that seemed at the time a more important image to spread around. Our freshman year, she was asked to be the director of Sorority Sing, a big competition between sororities at Clemson in the seventies. To be in this position was a HUGE honor and responsibility and some of us wondered if she was up to the task. However, she proved to be really good at the job as those of us who were singing practiced for weeks and weeks to win this coveted trophy.

When the night of the competition arrived, we were all gathered in our long dresses, waiting to go before the judges. Everyone was nervous and excited. Right before we went on the stage, this wild party girl, asked if everyone could hold hands and pray. This seemed only natural to her, as her church choir always did this on Sundays before leading worship. Her sisters looked at her with what she thought could only be fear that she would ask one of THEM to pray. So she bowed her head and prayed for God's blessings.

After the prayer, the young woman noticed many of her sorority sisters crying. She could not imagine that they could be THAT nervous over a singing competition and finally asked one of her friends what was going on. Her sister told her, “We are crying because we are so happy – you see we had no idea you were a Christian.”

The young woman was shocked. You could have knocked her over with the proverbial feather. But in her spiritual immaturity, she had not yet learned that going to church on Sundays is not enough. That the lessons of church must be lived every day and not just on the Sabbath.

Well, friends, if you haven't figured it out yet, the young woman in the story is me! I knew in my heart that I belonged to God but got so caught up in the party aspects of college, that I forgot that living out my faith is a call that has to be reflected in my actions all the time and not just when it was convenient.

Imagine the shock now when I go to preach in churches around here and one of those sorority sisters is in the congregation! I had one come up to me once after church and say, “I just kept thinking to myself all during the sermon– how did THAT happen?” I reminded her that God uses who HE chooses and uses us in remarkable ways. Ann Weems says, “Sometimes God's choices leaves us a little baffled” and believe me, I am often the most baffled of all!

Which lead to the FIRST and most important element about call. I bet you thought I skipped it didn't you. Well no – I was just saving the best for last. The most important but also the hardest part of being called is asking ourselves *where* the call is coming from. In other words, it is important to understand if we are following God's will or our own.

You see, it has been my experience that if I want something badly enough it is easy to convince myself that it is the will of God. But I believe Paul's conversion story will help us all know how to discern if we are following God's call or someone else's. The Scriptures tell us that

after Saul was blinded on the road to Damascus, he was led by the hand into the city and "For three day he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

This says to me that Paul spent time with God and God alone. He was completely undistracted by the surroundings of the world. No outside images, not even eating. Saul listened to God and God's Holy Spirit and by that, he was ready to hear the message that Ananias delivered. And this is a reminder to us all that the main character in every conversion experience is God. It is God that changes our lives and nothing else or it is not really God's call. And when God is the agent of change, all things are possible.

A persecutor of the church become the minister of evangelism. A doubtful disciple follows God's call to reach out to someone previously despised and a connection for healing and wholeness is made. A wild party girl becomes a minister of the Word and Sacrament. A church that is 250 years old understands what God is calling them to do for the next 250 years and God's call to each of us and all of us continues.

Let us pray that, like Saul, God will remove the scales from our eyes and give us vision so that we, too may be a light to the nations. May God's call lead us to be his voice, his hands, his feet, his arms in a world where there is still much darkness. And may we follow the call of Jesus reaching out to those who God chooses, NOT who we would choose, so that all the world can experience God's scandalous grace. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(1) Preston Sprinkle, "Theology in the Raw" – Oct. 20, 2014

