

The Converting Community

Acts 9:1-6

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

May 5, 2019

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." (Acts 9:1-6, NRSV)

Restrictions for the Gorham Subdivision; Goshen, Indiana;
Recorded October 24, 1946 at ten o'clock AM.

The following restrictions are incorporated into the Plat and are to be recorded as an integral part thereof, and the said plat is subject thereto.

- a. All lots in the tracts shall be known and described as residential lots. . . . And no structure shall be erected on any residential building plot other than one detached single family dwelling not to exceed two stories in height, and a one- or two-car garage.*
- b. No building shall be erected on any residential building plot nearer than thirty-five feet to nor farther than forty from the front line. Nor shall any building be erected nearer than sixty-eight feet from the center line of any street or highway nor nearer than fifteen feet from any side lot line.*
- c. No residential lot shall be subdivided into building plots having less than 9,900 square feet of area nor a frontage of less than seventy-five feet.*
- d. No noxious or offensive trade shall be carried on upon any lot nor shall anything be done thereon which may be or become an annoyance or nuisance to the neighborhood.*
- e. No person of any race other than the white race shall use or occupy any building or any lot, except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race domiciled with an owner or tenant.*

You heard me right. Buried right in the midst of outbuilding restrictions, sewer disposal rules, and utility easements is this clause banning non-white people from the neighborhood, with an exception for domestic servants. Not too long ago, a clause like this one was just stipulation letter "f" in a legal document with thirteen stipulations.

Our family lives in the Gorham subdivision. Now, I didn't even know that this document existed until years after we moved to Goshen. These restrictions are no longer in effect, and racist

clauses like the one in this agreement are not even legal. But here's the thing that troubles me. Although these restrictions are no longer in effect, right now, in our neighborhood, the reality is that "No person of any race other than the white race uses or occupies any building."

I didn't write this agreement. I didn't agree to it. And, of course, I wouldn't. When I first saw this, I was sickened by it. But, make no mistake, I'm living in the neighborhood of its legacy. We all are. It's baked into the atmosphere. This document is no longer in effect, but the effect continues.

You know, at first glance, it may seem strange to begin a sermon based on the story of Saul's Damascus Road experience with the troubling history of my neighborhood's beginning or, in a larger sense, of our community's, our country's, racist history. But if that seems strange, it may be that we have a gaping hole in our gospel. It may be, as John Perkins writes, that "we have preached a gospel that leaves us believing that we can be reconciled to God – converted to Christ – without being reconciled to our Christian brothers and sisters who don't look like us.

It may be that we have accepted that the gospel is primarily about me and God and only secondarily about me and by neighbor. Our conversion to Christ necessarily involves our work for justice and desire to embrace the other, no matter who they may be.

At times, I think the church has gotten so caught up, so focused, on Saul's dramatic U-turn on the Damascus Road, that we miss the larger ways that God is working in this story. As evidence of this, I simply point to the lectionary. The lectionary text for today, the third Sunday of Easter, is Acts 9, verses 1 to 6. Exactly what we read, right. Verses 7-20 are given as optional, but here's the thing: I don't see how verses 7 to 20 can in any sense be called optional.

If we stop at verse 6, and we talk about Saul's conversion, and, by extension, our conversion, we will see it as a personal encounter with Christ at a specific point in time. And, in fact, that's how some people would define conversion: A personal encounter with Christ at a specific point in time.

But talking about conversion in that way, and only that way, is a distortion that leads to a distorted faith. It allows us to live in our houses without even realizing that we reside in a neighborhood built on injustice. It enables us to enjoy the fruit of oppression even as we proclaim freedom in Christ.

During the first chapters in Acts, we see God's Spirit on the move through the apostles and a growing number of believers. They are preaching/teaching, healing/yielding, baptizing/discipling, glorifying/ testifying, feeding/bleeding, sharing/daring, praying/obeying, and as all this was happening, as those disciples were breathing the life of Jesus into the shadows of death - Meanwhile, meanwhile -- Saul was still breathing threats and murder against those same disciples.

I've always liked that turn of phrase at the beginning of Acts 9. Saul, breathing threats and murder. You see, even here, even at the beginning, this story isn't just about an individual. The word *inspire*, in Latin, literally, refers to breathing. The disciples are inspiring life, breathing life, in the name of Jesus in the shadows of death. Meanwhile, Saul is inspiring death, breathing murder, to the same disciples because of that same name.

Our breaths, our lives, do not stop with us. We either inspire things that lead to life or we inspire things that lead to death. I once read an article in a science journal saying that it is a near certainty that each time we breathe, we breathe at least one molecule of air that each once passed through the lungs of Jesus. We breathe each others' breaths -- we're always connected, to each other and to those who have gone before us.

So as Saul was on his way on his way to Damascus breathing threats and murder against men and women who belonged to the Way, suddenly a great light flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. And the voice responded, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do."

What a terrible place to stop, right? We have to, have to, read verses 7 to 20. It's mandatory, not optional, at least if we want to understand what is happening. Verse 6 ends with Saul still tasting the pavement of the Damascus Road. But let's read on:

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

And now, you know the rest of the story. Or, to put it more accurately, the rest of part of a story that is embedded within a larger story that continues to this day.

Do you see why these verses can't be optional?

Saul's conversion can't be considered alone.

Yes, he had a dramatic turn-around, the type that we normally think about when talk about conversion.

The one who was breathing murder,
winds up being breathed upon by the Holy Spirit.

The one who threatened the disciples
winds up being disciplined.

The one whose goal was to bind and to drag Jesus' followers *from* Damascus
winds up being led *to* Damascus by the hand.

But that's only part of it.

The Lord called Ananias in a vision,
and told him of his plans to make Saul
his chosen instrument to carry his name among the Gentiles,
to the kings, to all the people of Israel.

Now, Ananias was already a Christ follower,
but this specific encounter was part of his conversion.

Through it, he became more fully aware
of what God was doing through Jesus,
to expand his blessings to all people,
And that led to the church's conversions to see and accept non-Jews as Christians.

Do you see it?

God uses Ananias' conversion as a part of Saul's conversion,
and Saul's conversion as a part of Ananias' conversion
and their conversions as a part of the church's conversion,
and the church's conversion is a part of my conversion, your conversion,
fulfilling God's promise to Abraham
to make a people of blessing to all nations,
to all neighborhoods built upon the legacy of brokenness and oppression.

Kathleen Norris says that "Conversion is no more spectacular than learning to love the people we live with and work among." I like that thought. For Saul, that meant loving, not killing, the disciples he had been persecuting. For the disciple, Ananias, that meant loving, not running from, Saul. For the church, that meant including Gentiles.

For Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship, what does that mean? For all of us living in a neighborhood, a country, founded upon racist ideology, what does that mean?

Documents like this neighborhood agreement can seem like from another era. Yet, less than a year ago, Lamekia Dockery, a black woman incarcerated at the Elkhart County Work Release Center, was left to die after pleading for medical attention for six days. Six days. During those six days, her guards punished her for creating a disturbance by putting her shackles and then taking her to solitary confinement. She died of sepsis from an untreated perforated ulcer.

No charges were filed, because, as the Elkhart County prosecutor found, "there is no criminal law in Indiana that would appropriately address what went on." And the thing is, she's most likely right.

Yet, Lamekia Dockery died, because, as a drug user, a black woman, and an incarcerated person, her human anguish was dismissed. The more marginalized you are, the more likely you are not be believed.

Our declaration of Jesus as Lord and Savior means that we can't turn a blind eye toward instances such as this.

I am not guilty of writing those subdivision regulations. I was not involved in the workings of the Work Release Center. Yet, as a Christian, my work, your work, is seeing our conversion as inextricably bound up in the struggle for justice and the ultimate goal of reconciliation.

That happened for Paul. Yet, if he had stayed on the Damascus Road, if we stay on the Damascus Road, we will miss God's Spirit all over the map, working in different people in different ways in different places, reconciling us together as one, one body of Christ.