

## Summer Reading 4 - Saul

Sermons don't usually come with illustrations,  
but today's actually does.

I'll give you a moment to grab your bulletin,  
and turn to the inside back cover and take a look.

What you're looking at is a photo of a painting,  
a photo taken by me, actually, back in April.

If you go to Rome, you'll likely go to the Spanish steps,  
because everyone does.

There will be a gazillion people there, and after a while you'll get tired of  
being with a gazillion people,  
and you'll start wandering away.

Wander north, away from the crowds,  
and you'll come to a church, Santa Maria del Popolo.

Walk up the aisle and into the side chapel.

It's dark, but but if you give the caretaker a couple coins,  
he turns the lights on for you.

And out of the darkness, the light will fall on this painting,

this painting by Caravaggio

of a moment when the light fell upon a man named Saul.

And, if you're me, you stand there in the shadows

and you begin to weep.

You weep at the beauty of this 500 year old painting,

at the thought of all the people who have stood where you stand and gazed

where you gaze.

And you weep for the power of the story that it tells.

And then — you take out your phone and take a slightly askew picture

of the painting so on some Sunday

in the months to come,

you can share the story with your church,

the story of this man, fallen to the ground, with his arms stretched toward

the light.

This is that Sunday.

And here is the story.

The story begins long before this moment captured by Caravaggio.

The story begins with a boy named Saul, from the town of Tarsus, who grew up, like Jesus did, as a faithful and observant Jew.

He never met Jesus of Nazareth,

but in the years after Jesus' death and resurrection,

Saul met plenty of Jesus followers.

And that's when Saul's dedication to his faith took an ugly turn.

Most other folks were fine with live and let live,

but Saul was deeply offended that anyone from his faith would choose to follow Jesus.

His religious commitment turned into religious intolerance —

His intolerance turned into hatred, and that hatred turned into violence, as religious zealotry often has over the centuries.

Saul was present in the crowd when

a Christian man named Stephen

was put to death by a mob, and became the first Christian martyr.

And Saul thought there needed to be a lot more of that.

He got word about then that in the city of Damascus,

there were a whole *lot* of these Jesus-followers.

So Saul figured the best use of his time

would be to head toward Damascus and see what he could stir up.

See who else he could torment, what violence he could start.

This man was bad news.

Saul was a hater through and through.

And then ... and then, well, what you see in this painting.

On the road to Damascus, something happens.

You heard Adam tell the story.

“Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him,

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Saul cries out “who *are* you?” —

but I’m thinking he already had a pretty good inkling.

And the voice says “Jesus.”

And then the voice says, “get yourself back up, and head on into the city.

Then you’ll find out the plans I have for you.”

So here's what Saul learns in that moment:

Jesus *is* alive.

The Resurrection was for real.

And Jesus has something in mind for him.

Here's what else Saul notices.

He can't *see* anything anymore.

What's just happened to him has left him literally blinded by the light.

And with his companions holding his hand,

he is led into the city of Damascus,

where he sits in a room for three days, it says,

not eating or drinking, still blinded, and mostly definitely overwhelmed.

This story is known as the conversion of Saul,

but there's another character in it whose love and faithfulness kinda blows

me away every time I read this story again.

While Saul's sitting dazed in that room,

on the other side of Damascus a little-known follower of Jesus named

Ananias has his own encounter with the Lord.

Christ comes to him in a dream, a vision,  
and says “Ananias, I need you to do something for me.  
Get up, go across town, look for the street called Straight.  
A guy named Saul from Tarsus is waiting for you there.  
In fact, right now, he’s praying,  
and he’s having his own vision that a guy named Ananias is going to come  
help him out,  
lay hands on him and cure his blindness.”  
Well, Ananias pushes back a little,  
and it’s hard to blame for that.  
He says “Lord, I’m not sure you’re aware of this,  
but Saul of Tarsus is a really, really bad dude.  
You might want to rethink this, Lord. Just saying.”

And Jesus says,  
“I have chosen Saul to be my instrument.”  
And here’s what Ananias does,  
and honestly, if I had to choose the bravest people in the Bible,  
Ananias would be top of the list.

Because he just takes a deep breath, and gets up and goes to find Saul.

You know Ananias had to be scared. Really scared.

And when he finds the right house, when he walks in the room,

this is what he says, and this just blows me away.

He says, “Brother Saul, I’m here.”

Brother. Calls him brother.

This man whom he knows is a hater.

This man who helped kill Saint Stephen,

who was *in* Damascus to capture other followers of Jesus,

Ananias’ friends, Ananias himself.

Yet Ananias calls him Brother.

Brother Saul, he says, I’m here.

And in rapid succession, this is what happens next:

As soon as Ananias touches his eyes, Saul can see again.

Immediately he asks to get baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Immediately he starts preaching to anyone who will listen, “Jesus IS the Son of God, people.”

It takes a while for the other Jesus followers to believe that this is for real, but eventually they do — it helps that Ananias vouches for him.

And people start coming from far and wide to hear Saul talk about Jesus.

Along the way he becomes better known as Paul,  
his Roman name.

He starts churches, all over the place.

And he starts writing letters, letters full of wisdom and encouragement and advice.

And here's some of what Saul, the hater, writes in those letters.

He writes:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels, but do not have love,

I am just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Love is patient and love is kind.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

That's what the former hater writes.

And he writes this:

There is no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer male nor female, no longer slave or freeman — in Christ Jesus, we are all one.



From hater to preacher of love,  
from violent bigotry to a proclaimer of unity,  
this is Saul's journey.

This is what God can do.

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About 25 years ago, a little before the turn of this century,  
there was a man who was,  
well, pretty much of a Saul, Saul-early-years that is.  
Floyd Cochran was his name, and Floyd was a hater.  
He was the national spokesman for Aryan Nations,  
one of the most frightening neo-Nazi organizations there was,  
with a master plan of establishing a white-only domain in the Northwest.  
And because he was one of their best communicators,  
it was his voice that was everywhere, on the radio, in interviews.  
He was not just a hater, but an incredibly well-known hater.

But something happened.

Two weeks before he was to address the Aryan Nation Convention,

Floyd had what what you might call a road to Damascus moment.

A sudden realization that what he was part of was evil.

So he left. Walked away from it all.

But he had no one and nowhere to go to.

He was now alone, homeless on the streets of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

There was no one from his old life that wanted anything to do with him

Floyd found himself, in desperation, placing a phone call to a woman that he

hoped would believe the change that had happened to him and help him.

He didn't know her, he had only heard of her .

That woman was Loretta Ross,

a black woman who worked at a non-profit in Atlanta, whose job was to monitor hate groups like the Klan and Aryan Nations.

That's who Floyd Cochran called.

And if Floyd was Saul,

knocked off his horse on the way to Damascus, or in this case, on his way to the Aryan Convention,

then Loretta Ross was his Ananias,

answering the phone and then staring at it in disbelief.

“This is Floyd Cochran?” she said.

“This is the Floyd Cochran?”

“I was expecting a death threat,” she said later. “These people don’t call someone like me just to talk.”

But it wasn’t a death threat. Floyd Cochran was asking for her help.

He said he’d had a revelation,

and he needed help leaving who he had been.

And Loretta Ross, like Ananias, took a deep breath,

and said “okay. Brother Floyd, I’m here.”

And she listened to him as he told his story.

And so began an improbable and inspiring friendship between an Aryan Nation spokesman — and a black woman worker for peace.

Soon after, the two of them went on a speaking tour around the country, speaking directly to young people about hate, about hate and reconciliation and change — and hope.

All these years later, the impact of her friendship with Floyd Cochran still resonates in Loretta Ross' life.

Now a university professor, she speaks passionately to her students about the importance of, as she says,

“calling in, not calling out” —

making room in our hearts and our listening

for even the most unlikely.

All going back to the moment when she picked up the phone

and heard the voice of a hater telling her he had changed.

He was a Saul, and she an Ananias — two thousand years after the originals.

Saul's story — Saul and Ananias' story — is the last story

in our little Summer Reading series,

our August trip through four important stories of the Bible.

And this last of my choices has maybe the most to say.

Three powerful lessons from this one story.

The first is this:

God is a disrupter. God is a disrupter.

God busts into people's lives and shakes them loose,  
God comes to us where we are and says "let me lead you somewhere new."  
God does not leave us alone,  
but keeps looking for ways to reach into our lives,  
knock us off our high horse sometimes,  
and say "listen up — I've got something for you to learn,  
I've got someone for you to meet."  
The God who called Esther to courage,  
chased Jonah across an ocean,  
and knocked the wind out of Saul,  
that God is a disrupter of our lives  
in the best possible way —  
to challenge and change and cajole,  
*and* to comfort and care and create.

That's one thing this story teaches us.

Here's the next:

God works through flawed people.

In fact, God loves working through flawed people.

Because, well, God loves us, and we've got flaws.

If God can grab a Saul and say "this man is going to be my best spokesperson,"

then God can sure as heck take each one of us just as we are, and use us for amazing things.

God can use each one of us, chipped and cracked vessels that we are, to be bearers of God's Spirit, ambassadors of grace, and doers of the Word.

We're all just a little bit broken, but we're all needed. Loved and needed for God's work.

And what's that work?

Well, that's the third thing this story tells us.

The work of God, the work of Love is, in the end, to see the holy in each other.

Whether it's Saul seeing the Jesus followers as children of God like him, or Ananias seeing Saul as a child of God;

whether it was Floyd Cochran suddenly seeing how hate had blinded him,  
or Loretta Ross responding to that phone call from him —  
all of them, all of them, managed to see the holy in the other,  
and so too must we.

We, too, are asked to recognize one another as children of the same God —  
to call people *in*  
more than we call them *out*.

Turn back to that painting in your bulletin.

Take a look one more time.

Take a look at Saul,

knocked off his high horse,

humbled by grace,

blinded by God's light.

There he is — the man who became known to the world as the Apostle Paul,  
who wrote almost half of our New Testament, our sacred writings.

Who spoke about mercy, and preached forgiveness,

who wrote verses about love that we know by heart,

and words like poetry telling us that we are one body,

*one* body in Christ Jesus.

There he is – flawed, broken, changed, loved, called.

May God – the loving disrupter of our lives –

be at work within each one of us,

just as God was at work in Esther and Jonah and David and Saul – and

Ananias –

and may we be bearers of God's grace

and instruments of God's peace

and God's own word of love to a world that's waiting.

Amen.