Kelly Ryan

“The Absolute Last Person”

April 10, 2016

Acts 9:1-20

The text goes out of its way to make sure we have the sense that Saul is a bad guy. Right before this, Saul is named as approving of the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr for “The Way”, by an angry mob. Saul is basically a Pharisee; he sees anything that dilutes or distorts Jewish religious purity as a threat. And he has really picked up some strong zeal for persecuting aka being thorough and diligent in his enforcement of righteousness. He’s just trying to ensure the survival of his people, and wants to stamp out any distortions of the tradition he values.

 Yet on his way to do what he must have thought of as holy work, then he receives a vision. And how unsettling must it have been for him, to be knocked to the ground with the voice of the cross-dead Jesus he had figured a religious fraud? He had three days of very little distraction to make sense of that. And something shifted.

 Throughout this story, I see people who think they know everything they need to know. Saul and Ananias are both people who are set in their ways, who know who their people are and aren’t.

They’re sure about themselves, and sure about their God and what that God wants. But the deeply wondrous and deeply annoying thing about God is how God usually disrupts those things we think are sure. This is an Easter moment--God is precisely where they didn’t expect God to be. In this story, Saul and Ananias are then jolted into the farthest opposite of what they would want to do, and somehow find grace there.

 This story is full of those opposite-day shifts. Saul goes from “breathing threats and murder” to followers of the Way, ready to hunt them down, to one of the most significant early theologians of the Christian tradition. And Ananias goes from absolutely avoiding this threats-and-murder breather, to being his means of healing. He goes from calling him “this man” to “brother”.

Both of these men became vulnerable in ways they would have dreaded—Saul, completely helpless—blind, weakened without food or water. And Ananias, actively seeking out someone who was carrying a writ to arrest and detain people exactly like him. He was Saul’s target. He explained this to God again, in case God missed that. It was uncomfortable. Yet something sacred was working between them.

 What if the person you most want to avoid is exactly where grace is waiting to unfurl? What if the person you find antithetical to you is the one who can reveal something powerful about how the holy works in our world? I’ve found that it seems like those are more often the people who reveal this new holy thing—even when I kind of hate that that’s where it came from. But almost consistently, when something can soften in me, that softness allows something profound can manifest.

Notice, Saul’s greatest moment of transformation happened while he couldn’t even see in front of him. When we has as vulnerable as a little baby, being led by the hand by his traveling companions and unable to eat or drink.

 There is a sort of imagination needed to open ourselves to this; to grace in the last person we’d want. Courage, too.

As I was thinking about this sermon, I was racking my brain trying to think of examples of someone who might be the very last person that you’d imagine finding grace with. I’ve had those experiences of people who I just want to avoid at all costs, people who raise my hackles and just feel so toxic I don’t even want to come near them. These are often, for me, very sexist people who think they’re just “telling it like it is.” As a woman in a still male-dominated field, heck, as a woman period, this is a familiar encounter.

 And as I thought through, in my own experience, moments of grace from people I least expected, I found an important thread: it’s really difficult to find grace with someone who doesn’t respect you as fully human. I’ve had male colleagues pat me on the head, use the “listen, sweetheart” and tell me why a perspective like mine is not important to a conversation about ministry.

And I’ve had colleagues who disagree deeply with me, but respect me and me them enough as an equal to debate and honor each other’s viewpoints. I can find grace and deep value and I often learn something about who God is in those deep differences, because we still honor the sacred worth and sacred call in one another.

 I think this is an important part of this story between Paul and Ananias: the conditions for that profound moment are that they become fully human to one another. Ananias balks at God’s charge to go seek out this violent man Saul to heal him. He makes sure he reminds God, “do you even remember who this guy is?!” But when Ananias reaches him, something shifts in his heart enough to call even someone as dangerous as Saul “brother.” That once-enemy has been named as like beloved equal.

A favorite author of mine wrote of finding the holy in those we think to be enemies, “We are desperate enough to hear the Gospel—to hear some good news-- that we can even hear it from each other.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Of course, I don’t want this to sound like a strong suggestion from your pastor to go find that person who deeply hurt or violated you, whose very presence makes you tremble with remembered trauma. But during the Easter Season, we have the particular chance to reflect on how life springs up where we thought there was only death, and grace springs up where we thought there was only fear.

And the grace there, the grace Ananias experienced and we can too, is that we may feel afraid of those who we find antithetical to what we value—but in God’s call, that fear is not the end of the story.

When we encounter not just one another but the one we may consider the “other” with vulnerability, when we just have the courage to show up to even the moments that make our skin crawl, we may be surprised by the breadth of how the holy works in our world. God is revealing goodness and grace in those we’d never imagine.

This story is a good invitation to stop and examine where we might be closed. Who we might be closed off to. Where might God inviting you to be open? Who is that person you would never expect could reveal something of the holy to you? To our world? Push yourself a bit beyond your comfort zone. Beyond those comfortable people. If even something sacred can manifest in threats-and-murder Saul, who else might surprise us? As Nadia Bolz-Weber says, What if that person you want to avoid is your best shot at grace today?[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and a Saint*. Jericho Books, New York. 2013. p. 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All The Wrong People*. Convergent Books, New york. 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)