

## **Least Known, Most Interesting: Ananias**

Acts 9

July 24, 2016

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 of 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." Then men who were travelling 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 to 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 said, "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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I have 2,143 friends on Facebook.  
That's just a little more than are members of our congregation.

It's a strange and wonderful group (kind of like our congregation!).

On Facebook, I'm friends with someone who was my best buddy in Kindergarten who is now a rocket scientist at MIT. I'm friends with pastors in Malawi, and Scotland, and Bangladesh. I'm friends with women I used to date in college. I'm friends with seminary classmates, college roommates, former church members, current neighbors, and many of you.

It's kind of an amazing collection of people. It's not a comprehensive list of those I know or have known, but it captures well the places where my life has intersected the lives of others.

I know those of you under the age of 21 are probably rolling your eyes and wondering when your preacher will finally get with it and start to SnapChat or Instagram, but Facebook truly is a place of community for me. It helps me keep in touch with the people in my life. By in large, I enjoy seeing updates, reading articles that friends post, following comments that continue conversations.

But as of late it's been difficult for me to read through my Facebook feed. It's been difficult because what I read there is beginning to reflect the crass, polarized, and suspicious society in which we live.

It's easy for me turn off the talking heads on the TV. It's easy to not tune into talk radio. It's easy to minimize the comments section at the bottom of articles that I read online. But now all of that negativity has crept into my community of friends.

It's probably been a slow build. I'm sure the fact that we are in an election year cycle has something to do with it. Yet I notice that now, even tragedies are an occasion for rancor. We're so accustomed to making our point, defending our position, staying within the proscribed boundaries of our partisan positions that when something tragic happens we see the event as an opportunity to confirm our self-righteousness.

I'm not just talking about my friends. I'm confessing that I feel the same instinct. And I see it play out over my Facebook feed. In one-sided articles that are the posted as if they contain all the facts. And back-handed swipes at one party or candidate or another. And comments that minimize the intellect, or patriotism, or faithfulness of another who holds the opposite view. And – so often – comments that are filled to the brim with fear.

What's disturbing is that I am witnessing all of this – not among the people I don't know – but among the people that I do.

And it breaks my heart.

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We're in the middle of a sermon series called "Least Known, Most Interesting" about some of the minor characters in the Bible. If you are like me, it's a little intimidating to try to see yourself in the heroes or heroines of the stories in the Bible: Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam, Peter. But the Bible is also full of other people – bit players – who only appear briefly on the screen. I think these kinds of people can teach us a lot about what it means to be faithful.

The scripture we heard this morning is familiar to us. In this passage, we normally concentrate on Saul's sensational conversion along the Damascus road and subsequent call into the ministry. Today, however, I want to focus on the other character in the story: Ananias.

Just after the fireworks of the conversion, God does something else in the background: he taps Ananias on the shoulder and tells him to get up and go to find a man named Saul. Ananias had good reason to object, but eventually he did what God asked...he got up and went.

Ananias got up and went to the house of the man who had developed a well-deserved reputation for persecuting his fellow believers,

He got up and went to the house of the man who was "breathing threats and murder" against his fellow disciples,

He got up and went to the house of the man who presided over the death of the first Christian martyr while Stephen was stoned.

Ananias got up and went to that man's house, and when entered it, he called the man "Brother."

"Brother Saul," he said.

Brother Saul.

"Brother" was code for "believer."

In the first days of the church, when it wasn't too certain whether this Christian movement would amount to much, the people who constituted the church called themselves brothers. There were, of course, sisters there, too.

There was Brother Peter, with his new found authority and zeal for the gospel; there was Sister Mary, with her resurrection experience still fresh in her mind; there was Brother Thomas, full of faith and confidence in the Lord<sup>1</sup>. Brothers and sisters all – this is how the body of Christ was known.

When you read the book of Acts – as it is a book about the birth of the church – what you begin to notice is that God does a funny thing. God grows the family. What begins as a small band of sisters and brothers – literally, after Jesus' resurrection, just a handful of people gathered in an upper room – what begins that way gradually gets larger. The way God grows the Christian movement is not by replicating the same kind of people again and again, but instead God grows the church by adding more and more interesting branches to the family tree – perhaps none more interesting than the grand persecutor of the faith named Saul.

The story of Saul's conversion is proof positive that being a part of the body of Christ is not about picking your family – it is about loving your family.

Here is where we can learn from this bit player in God's drama – the man named Ananias.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:14-15

There is no, rational reason for Ananias to endear himself to Saul. Saul doesn't deserve Ananias's mercy or hospitality. Yet Ananias called Saul his brother because of his devotion to the God who chose to include Saul in the family.

God had big plans for Brother Saul. Bigger plans that Ananias could possibly imagine.

Brother Saul was to be God's instrument to take the message of the gospel to the Gentiles...to the non-Jews...to the rest of the world. Brother Saul was the one who best articulated the inclusive message of the gospel, saying "there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

You know what's funny? Brother Saul is why you and I are here – connected to the church, included in the promise of the gospel. Because we are Gentiles...people who, but by the grace of God, have been grafted into the family tree of the body of Christ.

It is because of Brother Saul – God's instrument to the Gentiles – who was baptized because Ananias treated him like one of the family.

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Do you see what Jesus did there?

Jesus took a small, but radical act of faithfulness on the part of Ananias, and he used it affect change that has rippled throughout the generations to connect more people to the new life available in Christ.

We have the benefit of looking back on thousands of years of history to see how much of an impact Brother Saul had upon the landscape of the Christian faith. I doubt Ananias had a clue. He may have left the newly baptized Saul and thought, "good luck with that, Jesus. You must be out of your mind!"

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 3:28-29

I am amazed at how Ananias treated Saul, in part because of what we know about the realities of the world that Saul and Ananias lived in, and, in part, because of the realities of the world in which we now live.

Threat and persecution may look differently today than they did in Saul's time, but they still exist. Where Saul set out to bind those with whom he found fault and drag them back to Jerusalem – today, we settle for shame and ridicule and banishment.

We have come to accept that it is normal to believe that the *worth* of a person, their love of country, their faithfulness to the gospel, or their capacity for rational thought depends on whether or not we agree with that person. The way we speak to and treat one another suggest that unless you share my views you are not a part of my family.

But that's never how God assembles a family.  
And it's never how God expands a family.

I can get overwhelmed by the negativity. The litany of tragedies over the past few years is enough...but to compound those tragedies by taking stock of how divided we are as a people is too much. How can our world heal if we can't even communicate with one another?

It seems impossible to reverse the trend towards negative speech. We see it reinforced on the national news, in the language of our leaders, and those who are seeking to be our leaders. It threatens to divide our own community.

So let's start small.

Let's all take a pledge. The politicians do it – why not us?

Pick a circle of people in your life: not the people that agree with everything you think, but a circle of people that God has put in your path.

Maybe it's your colleagues at work.

Maybe it's your classmates at school.

Maybe it's your Facebook friends, or Twitter followers, or Snapchat chatters...

Definitely the people who are your fellow members of this church.

Let's take a pledge that when we talk with this circle of people, we will use the language of family. That we will honor and respect difference. That we will be patient. That we will assume no mal-intent.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, in the midst of a world of difference, we have a special mandate to treat people well. We are not only bound by cultural norms, or civic duty – we are bound by our identity as children of God. Our reasons for treating people with respect have little to do with being polite and well mannered. They have everything to do with God's expectation of us.

And who knows? Maybe our small commitment to faithfulness might rub off on the world around us?

God has been known to accomplish stranger things by way of regular people like us.

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