

First Presbyterian Church
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The Names We Call Each Other
Acts 9:1-19

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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During my junior and senior years of college I lived in a duplex with 13 other young men.

Whatever you are imagining that house was like, you are probably right. The house looked like it had been built in about three and half weeks. It was managed by a landlord who was very good about collecting the rent, but who thought that the “maintenance” of a property meant waiting until the tenants tore it to the ground or until the Lord came back in final judgment...whichever came first.

The duplex was in Chapel Hill, North Carolina on Caldwell Street, and the fourteen of us who lived there stirred up enough trouble to earn ourselves a reputation as “the Caldwell Boys.”

We were brash, messy, and loud.

We were competitive: about grades, pick-up basketball, and sports trivia.

We were in college, and we had a blast.

When you live in such proximity to 13 other young men you learn a lot about their personalities. It only took about three or four months for the fourteen of us to develop nicknames. We called one of the guys, a former football player, Beefcake. We ended up shortening it simply to “Beef.” Another we called “The President” who was big into student government. “Sloppy Robs” had a room that no one dared to enter. “Taz” had a bit of a temper. “The Bus” liked to think he was strongest person in the weight room. And after a couple of other tries, one of us became known simply as “Rev.”

The Caldwell Boys are like family to me. We experienced an incredible part of our lives together as we grew into half-way responsible, contributing members of society. Fifteen years later, we make it a point to get together every fall for a weekend of bad golf, great stories, and updates on what is happening in our families.

To this day, we call each other by the names we used in college. They are names that are rooted in relationship. They are names that have history and memory.

They are names that describe our connection; that speak of the way that we belong to one another.

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The scripture we heard this morning is familiar to us. In this passage, we normally we tend to 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.

In the wake of Saul’s conversion, God reached out and called Ananias to get up and go. 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 waited for the Holy Spirit 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 Lord¹. Brothers and sisters all – this is how the body of Christ is 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.

Consider Ananias. 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 him 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."²

Brother Saul is why you and I are here, as 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 – who was baptized because Ananias treated him like one of the family.

¹ Acts 1:14-15

² Galatians 3:28-29

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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.

When I read or watch the news, or even my Facebook newsfeed, I am worried about the ways we treat one another. There is a disturbing and foreboding trend in our language that is too often hateful and destructive.

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.

Whether it be regulations around gun ownership
Or our philosophy on taxes
Or issues of sexuality and marriage
Or immigration
Or the role of government
Or, even, in our city, the airport or the streetcar

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.

While there are lots of examples of our brokenness, the polarized nature of our society is certainly near the top of the list.

In this place, we defy the expectations of the world around us, in part, because we have decided that we will not be a church defined by the issues that divide. I love that about this church.

And I think our holy challenge that will help us continue on “the more excellent way” is found in not only not being defined by the polarizing issues that swirl around us, but by actually practicing and modeling what it looks like to talk about those issues in ways that hold open a space for another point of view, all the while maintaining the ties that bind us together in relationship.

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Maybe you remember the controversy last summer around Chick-Fil-A?

Due to the company's contributions to lobbyists committed to upholding the traditional definition of marriage, other groups organized a boycott of the restaurant. One of those with a major role in organizing the boycott was a gay man named Shane Widmeyer.

A few months ago, Shane wrote an article describing what I would classify as a holy conversation between he and Dan Cathy – the President and COO of Chick-fil-A – and a deeply committed Christian.

Last August, at the height of the media attention surrounding the boycott, Dan Cathy called Shane Widmeyer. At first, Shane wasn't sure he should take the call, but he did. Shane writes:

The first call lasted over an hour, and the private conversation led to more calls the next week and the week after. Dan Cathy knew how to text, and he would reach out to me as new questions came to his mind. This was not going to be a typical turn of events.

His questions and a series of deeper conversations ultimately led to a number of in-person meetings with Dan and representatives from Chick-fil-A. He had never before had such dialogue with any member of the gay community. It was awkward at times but always genuine and kind.

It is not often that people with deeply held and completely opposing viewpoints actually risk sitting down and listening to one another.....

Never once did Dan or anyone from Chick-fil-A ask for [me] to stop protesting Chick-fil-A. On the contrary, Dan listened intently to our concerns and the real-life accounts from youth about the negative impact that Chick-fil-A was having on campus climate and safety at colleges across the country.

Dan.... had to both hold to his beliefs and welcome me into them. He had to face the issue of respecting my viewpoints and life even while not being able to reconcile them with his belief system. He defined this to me as "the blessing of growth." He expanded his world without abandoning it. I did, as well.

As Dan and I grew through mutual dialogue and respect, he invited me to be his personal guest on New Year's Eve at the Chick-fil-A Bowl. This was an event that [my group] and others had planned to protest. Had I been played? [I wondered].... No. It was Dan who took a great risk in inviting me: He stood to face the ire of his conservative base (and a potential boycott) by being seen or photographed with an gay activist.....

Instead, he stood next to me most of the night, putting respect ahead of fear. There we were on the sidelines, Dan, his wife, his family and friends and I, all enjoying the game.....How much better would our world be if more could do the same?³

³ From the Huffington Post, courtesy of the Rev. Dr. Anna Pinckney Straight and her paper (The Well, 2013, Advent 2).

As disciples of Jesus Christ, in the midst of a world that is pluralistic and growing ever more so, 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.

Because we are claimed by Christ, we are connected to one another. Our neighbors become our brothers and sisters. We don’t get to choose, because God is the one who creates our family tree.

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Ananias called him “Brother Saul.”

Before he could see it, he trusted God’s assurance that there was a connection. Before he could see it, he trusted that there was shared history.

He called him “Brother Saul.”

and then there was healing,
and there was relationship,
and there was life.

Let all who have ears, hear.

Amen.