

## God's Vision for bullies

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Hearing Bible stories with our modern ear is often a challenge. If you haven't already heard about this practice, I invite you to try it the next time you listen to a Bible story. As you listen, pay attention to what piece or pieces of the story grab your attention: It might be a word or phrase. It might be a situation or character that we resonate with, or you might really dislike a character.

It is important to connect with a given Biblical story; you might ask yourself: *Why does this part stand out for me?* Or, *why does that character evoke anger in me?* Saul, for instance, is one of those Bible personalities that has evoked extreme reactions. Here we have a powerful Jewish religious leader who condoned the persecution and even execution of followers of Jesus. Upon first and second and even third glance it is tempting to judge him, and other Jewish leaders, for their extreme treatment of the Jesus movement. It's helpful, though, to step back when we have powerful reactions; we can jump to quick conclusions, rather than sitting with tough and relevant questions. Dig a bit into the context of the time, and we perhaps can imagine how the protectors of Jewish religion saw the Jesus movement skewing Judaism, watering it down. There is no defending, though, Saul's extreme methods of protecting his version of Jewish faith.

It was a dilemma for Saul, for the early followers of Jesus were finding success beyond Jerusalem, says the storyteller Luke in the book of Acts. They had gone to the north toward Damascus, the big city in Syria that was largely Jewish. Saul was tracking the followers of Jesus, and it was on this journey to Damascus that Saul was struck down.

What a story! The enemy of the Jesus movement is struck down by a strange encounter with Jesus himself. Rendered blind, he is taken on a journey to who knows where. At the same time, Ananias, a person of the Way (that is what the followers of Jesus called themselves, "the Way"), is told in a vision that he is to find this man Saul.

"Are you kidding me!?" Is the stunned, probably angry reaction of a person who is truly terrified of this man Saul. Nonetheless, God brings together these two seeming enemies, as different in their spiritual outlook as you can ever imagine.

What strange scheme God seems to have devised:

On his way to destroy "the disciples of the Lord" (9:1),  
Saul encounters the living Jesus  
and becomes one of his disciples instead.<sup>1</sup>

Our attention tends to focus on Saul, and then Paul in this storyline. But, you know what, the focus of this and, well all the stories of the Book of Acts, is God. God's visions, as always, baffle human conventions. How many of us think to make bullies and antagonists into heroes? In this case, a person who made it his life's work to

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Wall. "Exegetical Perspective". *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

execute Jesus' followers, finds himself under the care of a person he considered an enemy of the Jewish faith!

At the heart of transformation in our Christian history, is a Vision that is so disorienting, utterly disquieting, and, frankly, indomitable when it takes hold. It is a bit frightening if we truly pay attention to the details of this story we hear today of Saul. You see, God can do anything with anyONE.

I'm sure you have written off more than a few bullies in your life; praying desperately that you will never have to deal with them again in your life. Saul's story of redemption reminds us to *never say never*.

Flannery O'Connor put it this way,

I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.<sup>2</sup>

There are definitely characters in our lives who could use a wake-up call like this! But seriously, if you and I want to learn the ways of Jesus, fundamental to Christian living is to trust Holy Vision.

Many Bible stories say it in different ways, that God can accomplish what we think impossible, and *often through people we might like the least, or even loathe*. Sometimes, WE are that problematic person, and we need a bit of tough love.

Perhaps we are at a time in our lives when our behaviours or attitudes are part of a destructive system that judges, oppresses, harms God's Creation. Sometimes WE end up getting knocked down, humbled, disoriented and our lives turned around, so we see, and act more like Jesus.

Today's challenge for you, and for me is this: Think about the "bullies" and "buffoons" in your lives. Take a few minutes to pray for them - really, earnestly - pray for them. And may we remember that God's vision includes bullies. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, Sally Fitzgerald, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 355.