

Hello, Church, Family of God. This is pastor Renée Antrosio, glad to be with you again in our study of the Acts of the Apostles. Last week, I appreciated Dr. Dana's teaching from Acts 18, highlighting the friendship of colleagues in the preaching of the good news and how they helped each other to be more effective. She noted the comfort of the Holy Spirit, how the Lord encouraged Paul not to be afraid, but to keep speaking in Corinth with the support of God's people.

Today we are going back to Acts 9, returning to the early days immediately after Saul encountered Jesus on the road, was blinded by the bright light, and then was healed through Ananias' prayer. As we've noticed, Saul was passionate for his faith, zealous in teaching the truth, and so immediately began using his vast Biblical knowledge to argue in the synagogues to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. The text says he grew stronger and stronger. And this is one of those places where our author Luke's simple narratives of what happened- without providing an obvious commentary- make it easy to miss the subtlety of his insights about this particular season of church growth.

Saul was a strong debater. He had skills that God honed and used with increasing effectiveness as he grew and matured in his faith. But at this point in his development, his argumentative style was not convincing local leaders to change their minds through his compelling arguments; it was mostly just making them mad. This is not a point where the Lord encouraged Saul to keep speaking- which is usually what we read (like further on in Acts) and what we preach. Instead, twice- once in Damascus and then again in Jerusalem- his fellow Jewish believers had to intervene and rescue him.

Saul got into debates with the Greek-speaking Jews as well, but they tried to kill him. When the family of believers learned about this, they escorted him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Acts 9:29-30

This family of believers was the Aramaic-speaking Jews, the disciples who used to be fishermen from up north in the Galilee. Peter and the other apostles had stayed in Jerusalem after Stephen's murder. The church there continued to meet at the Temple for prayer and in people's homes for meals. But Saul's methodology at that point was not adding to the number of believers; it was stirring up controversy and putting him in danger. So the Jewish believers sent him back to his hometown of Tarsus to cool his heels a bit. Saul stayed there approximately 8-14 years, sometimes called the "silent years" when little to nothing is known or written about what he was doing. It was a time of preparation, retreat, growth and maturation to be ready for the work God would call him to. After those 10 or so years, when the Gentile church began to grow in Antioch in Acts 11, Barnabas went back to get Saul from Tarsus to help teach the new Gentile believers.

Barnabas may be the unsung hero of Acts. He is “the encourager.” When the church needed funds to take care of the needs of the people, including the widows, Barnabas sold a field and brought the money and gave it to the apostles to distribute.

Joseph, whom the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (that is, “one who encourages”), was a Levite from Cyprus. He owned a field, sold it, brought the money, and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Acts 4:36-37

Here in Acts 9, it is Barnabas who introduced Saul to the apostles in Jerusalem and explained that he truly was now a disciple of Jesus. Barnabas could see Saul’s potential, his confidence. But Jerusalem wasn’t a good fit for Saul’s message. Maybe he knew too many people. He provoked too much debate. For the church there *at that time*, this was not an effective method. How do we know this?

- 1) The fellow believers got Saul out of town. They didn’t encourage him to stay or keep speaking, nor does Luke note any words from the Lord to stay or speak.
- 2) Luke describes the **effect** of removing Saul from the situation:

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. God strengthened the church, and its life was marked by reverence for the Lord. Encouraged by the Holy Spirit, the church continued to grow in numbers. Acts 9:31

The Jewish and Samaritan believers enjoyed a time of peace, increasing strength, and encouragement by the Holy Spirit. And the church grew- not because they were winning debates in the synagogues, but by their ordinary witness of new life in Jesus- where their care for the poor and having common meals and sharing resources was a testimony to those around them. The church grew as more and more Jews and Samaritans embraced the revelation of Jesus as Messiah.

What might we learn from the subtlety of Luke’s writing about Saul, his fellow believers, and the growth of the Jewish church?

Sometimes, debate only makes people angry. It doesn’t convince people, win hearts and souls, or cause them to change their minds. Clearly, throughout Acts the apostles preached the good news boldly, so it isn’t about being silent or afraid to speak. Many times in scripture we are encouraged to tell our story, to invite others to come and see, to preach the good news. **And**- there are times and places where being argumentative

or the best debater does not further the peace, strength, and growth of the church. Barbabas realized that Saul's skills were better suited to teaching Gentiles in the Greek-speaking world, probably before Saul or anyone else recognized that. Well, God knew, as Jesus said to Ananias:

**“This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”
Acts 9:15b-16**

Not all methods, not all personalities, not all debates are effective at all times in all places. It is not the strength of our arguments that convince people of the good news. In today's lectionary passages, the scriptures that are “assigned” for churches all over the world that pastors and priests will be teaching from, Jesus tells a story, in Luke 16:

“There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores.

“The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. Luke 16:19-22 (CEB)

Jesus recounts the conversation that Father Abraham has with the rich man, who begs him to send Lazarus to warn his brothers that their unjust living will reap its reward.

Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them.’ The rich man said, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.’ Abraham said, ‘If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’” Luke 16:29-31 (CEB)

In other words, neither skilled debate nor miraculous signs can convince people if they are not open to God's message of love and justice. God is revealed through Moses and the Prophets and through creation to all nations. Dr. Dana referenced this when she quoted Paul in Athens in Acts 17

God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, ‘We are his offspring.’ Acts 17:27-28

In Acts 17 we see a more mature Saul, sharing the good news with Gentiles in Greece by building on what they know, quoting their own poets, referencing their own statues to establish common ground in order to explain God's revelation of Jesus as the man God appointed and raised from the dead to be the judge of all humanity.

But in Acts 9, Saul returns to Tarsus so the church in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria- all places that Jesus himself taught, healed, and traveled- could enjoy a time of peace, strengthening and growth, encouraged by the Holy Spirit.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. God strengthened the church, and its life was marked by reverence for the Lord. Encouraged by the Holy Spirit, the church continued to grow in numbers. Acts 9:31

This scripture is the foundation from which our teaching next week grows, where Shereen Arulpragasam will share more with us about what she has been hearing from the Lord about how we can be guided by the Holy Spirit now as a fellowship. I am encouraged that the Holy Spirit is moving among us, doing new things, and I want to continue to pray and be open to whatever God is doing among us.

And so for the last part of today's teaching, we return our focus to Peter, the leading apostle whom Jesus established as the rock on which he would build the church. With Saul safely back in Tarsus, Peter travels about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem to encourage the believers there.

As Peter toured the whole region, he went to visit God's holy people in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas who was paralyzed and had been confined to his bed for eight years. Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Messiah heals you! Get up and make your bed." At once he got up. Everyone who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. Acts 9:32-35

One thing I love about this scripture is when Peter tells him to make his bed! That seems like just the kind of quotation that Christian parents might use on a Saturday when the kids have been lying around, "You know what the Bible says: Get up and make your bed!"

And yet, more seriously, I think we all sometimes need to hear these words of healing and encouragement. Are there places in our lives where we are paralyzed, where we have felt unable to move for years? Where might you need Jesus' healing to get you unstuck so you can get up, put that bed away, and move on? Sometimes the healing we

need is physical and sometimes we have become confined in other ways and need Jesus to set us free and give us the strength to rise up.

In person, we are again going to pause for a time of prayer, particularly for those who are feeling stuck, paralyzed, confined. And for physical healing for the parts of the body that aren't working the way they should. Jesus wants to heal us. And while some parts of our healing may not be this side of heaven, as even Paul was told about his own ailment, Jesus wants us to be bold enough to ask, courageous enough to pray and be open to what the Lord might have for us.

Our healing, whether physical or emotional or psychological or spiritual, is a testimony to God's love and the good news of Jesus in our lives. In this part of Luke's telling of the story in Acts 9, the church grows in response to the witness of the Holy Spirit at work in people's lives to heal and encourage.

This coming Saturday is one of those opportunities to testify to what God has been doing in our fellowship through the ministry of Reparations. The State of Illinois African Descent-Citizens Reparations Commission is hosting a public hearing at Krannert, and as local example of a practical possibility of Reparations that addresses both education and the wealth gap, I will be sharing about our Generation to Generation Reparations Pilot Project where NCF has so far invested in education savings accounts for 31 African American grandchildren of our fellowship. This is good news of God's justice, of listening to Moses and the prophets, like Jesus said in Luke 16. It is a testimony of what healing could look like in an area that has long been paralyzed.

God wants to bring about healing and growth through the testimony of Jesus' work in our lives to build up the church through the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps you are being invited today to rest from debates and allow the Spirit to strengthen your faith. Perhaps there is an area of your life that needs healing, where Jesus can release you from confinement so that you can get up and move again. May we be encouraged by the Holy Spirit to continue to seek and be open to the healing and refreshment of growing together as the church of Jesus our Lord.