

Lessons from the Early Church—Part 1
“The Danger of Certainty”

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Acts 9: 1-20

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The Apostle Paul is regarded as one of, if not *the* greatest Christian missionaries to ever serve the Church. Heck, Paul is one of the reasons there even is a Church today. Beyond the original disciples, Paul was perhaps the one most responsible for spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ after his death and resurrection. His letters to the newly formed church communities throughout Mesopotamia make up almost half of the New Testament.

It’s why Paul is such a hero to many in the Church. He spent so much of his life proclaiming the Good News of God’s love wherever he could. Preaching. Teaching. Baptizing. Serving as a mentor.

And he did it all knowing how much it would cost him. He did it all knowing it would cause him to suffer and sacrifice... He did it all painfully aware of how the religious authorities were out to trample this new Christian movement.

After all, he used to be one of the Church’s greatest persecutors. He spent much of his early adulthood hunting and persecuting those who dared to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

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Our lesson from Acts shares a bit of this history with us. Except, as Acts tells it, Paul was still named Saul back then. Saul was his name throughout his childhood, as he grew up both a Hebrew and a Roman citizen. Saul was his name when he began studying with the great Rabbi Gamaliel and rose to power among the religious establishment as a Pharisee. Saul was his name when he began seeking out people of the “the Way,” those first followers Jesus. Saul was his name when he breathed threats and murder again these people, hunting them down and carting them off to prison. Saul was his name when he sought permission from the high priest to travel to a town called Damascus, because he’d learned there was a growing contingency of men and women there following in the way of Jesus Christ. *So* Saul was his name when the Lord confronted him on his way to Damascus... blinding him with a brilliant light, asking “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

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Now, as the Church looks back on the life and legacy of Paul, we tend to draw a big thick line in the sand, separating Saul from Paul. We act as if Saul was a bad guy, while Paul was a good guy. As if Saul was pure evil, while Paul was a saint.

But we can't do that. Saul and Paul were one and the same person. Same body of bones. Same tendencies of religious passion and zeal. So one can't be pure evil while the other is a holy hero, right?

Still more to the point, at no point in time did Saul—or Paul—ever think he was actually doing wrong. I mean, while *we* think of Saul as a bad guy (what, with how he tried to trample the Christian movement before it really got going), Saul saw himself as a good guy. Saul saw himself as a protector of the faith. As scholars point out, “Saul (loved) God, and (viewed it as his divine calling) to stamp out anything that, in *his* (opinion, dishonored God and the faith he held so dear).”¹ So Saul was on a mission—a divine mission in his mind, at least—to protect his faith from these strange groups of Hebrews who were distorting the Jewish faith by connecting the God of Israel to that Jesus of Nazareth guy they'd gotten rid of not too long ago.

In Saul's eyes, *those* were the bad guys. Those heretical Hebrews... the ones perverting the faith he so desperately wanted to keep pure. *They* were the ones who needed to be stopped!

So when the Lord confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul wasn't just stunned by a light so bright it rendered him blind... he was stunned by the Lord's question. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” As one scholar imagines it, “Saul (could) hardly believe his ears, thinking, ‘Who? Me? A persecutor?’”²

His certainty had blinded him to it.

His certainty that he was *right*...

His certainty that *his* faith was pure...

His certainty that *his* version of holiness matched the *Lord's* version...

His certainty that if you didn't agree with him, then you were also disagreeing with God...

It was certainty that blinded Saul to the way he'd weaponized his faith. It was certainty that blinded him to the way his faith in a God of love had morphed into a way of judgement and condemnation and, frankly, outright hatred of those who didn't fit his own narrow assumptions of who God should love and who God should punish.

So while he was on that road heading to Damascus, God intervened... and brought Saul's spiritual blindness out into the open, blinding his eyes so he couldn't see a thing.

It's as if God was saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Why are you so blind to your hatred? Why are you so blind to your self-righteousness?”

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It reminds me of something the Christian author Anne Lamont once summarized so well. “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” Have you heard that before? “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

¹ Amy G. Oden, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4043

² Ibid.

And yet, here we are, two millennia late, and it's Christ's Church that has a reputation for being exclusive... of thinking in black and white terms... of labeling some as good and others as bad... acting as if we've got all the answers while others are just fooling themselves.

As TPC's new Evangelism Committee discussed amid a book study we're sharing, this reputation for certainty is one of the reasons the mere word "evangelism" scares us. We're afraid to talk about faith with others because we don't want to come across as judgmental or exclusive or certain that we're right and the other is wrong.

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But there are lessons we can take from the early Church, friends. Lessons we can take from those first followers of Jesus who worked like heck to share and explore faith with others without carrying the arrogance or pride of being certain.

Lessons like the one we learn from Ananias—the man in our second lesson this morning. Acts makes clear, Ananias was certain Saul was a bad guy. He'd heard about Saul and all the people he was arresting. So he wanted nothing to do with him. But when God came calling and asked to actually go to Saul... to seek him out and lay his hands on him to heal him... Well, rather than clinging to his certainty that Saul didn't deserve to be healed, or that he should fear Saul... Ananias went. And healed him. And helped Saul begin his journey to becoming the Apostle Paul.

And while the disciples had lived their entire lives believing that the God of Israel was *only* the God of Israel... While they were certain there was no room for Gentiles—non-Jews—in God's covenant community... when God tore down the barrier between Israel and the Gentile world, the disciples didn't cling to certainties of the past... but embraced a possibility they'd never seen before.

And while Paul had lived his entire life amid a patriarchal society that denied women any kind of equality with men... when he realized that women were just as called as men to help spread the Gospel's good news, he lifted women like Phoebe and Susanna into prominent roles.

And though he had been taught his whole life that kosher eating was holy eating, when he realized such dietary restrictions stood in the way of some people's ability to grow closer to God, Paul let go of that certainty, too.

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You see, friends, in a world that still clings to its certainties... in a nation so bitterly divided, with the left certain the right is wrong and vice versa... amid a church that still has a reputation for denying perspectives other than our own... *We need* the lessons modeled by the early Church. Certainty is dangerous.

As the early church discovered, certainty... fundamentalism... the notion that you can know 100% of the will of God... it's folly. It's arrogance. But worst of all... it's *blinding*. It's blinding to the truth that faith, much like life, is not about being right or wrong. Faith is a journey of experiences and explorations, prayers and reflections, questions and dialogues as we grow closer to God and each other.

It's why the pursuit of curiosity is so much more integral to a healthy faith than the pursuit of certainty. When we're curious... when we allow ourselves to ask questions and wrestle with big ideas and tough issues, even if we don't ultimately reach a final conclusion the

journey of exploration is still beautifully formational. It still leads us to new growing edges and new perspective of new truths we otherwise would've never encountered.

The world needs to see that in the Church today, friends. And you and I—we need to experience it. To live it. To help make it manifest. Not a church of certainty... but a church full of curiosity. A church eager to ask questions and have real, heartfelt conversations with each other and, very importantly, with people out there, too. People who long to explore their own spiritual questions and curiosities without the fear of being bludgeoned by false certainties along the way.

It's why I'm so proud that curiosity isn't just one of our goals, Towson Presbyterian Church. It's one of our core values. It's part of who we are.

Not a church of certainties—but a church of curiosity. A church exploring stories and experiences of love and grace so broad and high, we know going in that they defy every certainty this world has. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.