

Acts 9:1-22
"Chosen Instruments"
Third Sunday of Easter

May 5, 2019
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

Two chosen instruments of God: one a fisherman; the other, a Pharisee. The first man was with Jesus during His entire ministry, but later denied being one of His disciples. The second man believed he was devoutly loyal to God, but later God revealed to him that he was persecuting God's people.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ summoned these men and countless others, including us, to confess the name of the Lord. Despite the unworthiness of Peter and Paul, Jesus redeemed them and all believers through His death upon the cross and His bodily resurrection from the grave. Jesus died, so that everyone who believes in Him would be redeemed and receive God's grace of forgiveness. Jesus rose, so we would be certain of our hope.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

[Paul, the Persecutor]

In the earliest years of the Christian Church, it would have been difficult to find a more dedicated opponent of Christ than Saul of Tarsus. From supporting the stoning of Stephen to rounding up and imprisoning Christians in Jerusalem, Saul did his best to destroy the Christian Church.

Why would Saul do this? Well, at the time he believed he was fulfilling the will of God. You see, Saul was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He boldly spoke God's Word as he knew it. And, what he believed was that Judaism was the true faith and Christianity was totally fake. What he couldn't get over is why anyone would follow a man who died a criminal's death — death by crucifixion.

Now, Saul believed that Jesus' death was justified. He believed that Jesus was a fraud. He believed that Jesus was leading people away from the true God.

Saul was also well aware of the claims that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead, but he thought those claiming this were crazy. He thought everyone speaking of His resurrection was delusional.

So, Saul considered it his holy duty to persecute the Christians without let-up and without mercy. He felt this was his godly duty to protect the Jewish faith from these delusional and misguided followers of Jesus.

In doing so, Saul was filled with righteous rage and righteous hate. Saul believed it was his duty to arrest Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

Today, persecution of Christians continues. Christians in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia deal with persecution every day. Islamist and communist governments murder Christians and destroy churches just because they can. Here in the United States, we typically don't see the physical persecution, but we do see a sinful culture that daily identifies Christians as haters and lifts up Islam as a true religion, which it's not.

This constant fear of death, but hope in Christ's promises, is similar to what the First Century Christians faced with Saul. Instead of one Saul, there are many Sauls. This is what the Christians in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia face today. They each know they may have to suffer and die for their faith in Jesus. But, they also know that they will enter paradise for their faith in Jesus. As North American Christians, this should also be our expectation. As Christ was persecuted, we should expect persecution.

This is how we can picture Saul. First Century Christians knew what to expect when Saul entered the area. They expected to become a martyr.

[Jesus Appears to Saul]

Now, one day, Saul received permission from the High Priest Caiaphas — via the Sanhedrin — to expand his persecution to Damascus, so he could arrest Christians there and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

Jesus, though, had other ideas.

As Saul was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying: **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”** (Acts 9:4b) Saul responded: **“Who are you, Lord?”** (Acts 9:5a). **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do”** (Acts 9:5b-6).

Everyone traveling with Saul witnessed the bright light and heard sounds, but it was only Saul who experienced the fullness of this revelation. Only Saul heard the voice of Jesus.

Immediately, Saul’s eyesight went blind, but he began to see things clearly. He realized that in persecuting the Christian Church, he had been persecuting the true Messiah. He realized that he had been persecuting God.

With this knowledge, Saul was led by his men hand-in-hand to Damascus to await what he was to do.

While in Damascus, Saul neither ate nor drank, but only prayed to God for he now knew that the Scriptures testified about Jesus.

[Jesus Appears to Ananias]

Jesus also appeared to Ananias, a disciple of Jesus, who lived in Damascus — a man that likely Saul came originally to arrest. Jesus told Ananias to visit Saul so that he would regain his sight. But Ananias knew of Saul. He knew Saul’s reputation. He knew that Saul could arrest him. He was puzzled. He was confused.

Jesus later said to Ananias: **“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel”** (Acts 9:15).

Later Ananias came to Saul, laid his hands on him, and baptized him in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through God’s gift of healing, Saul’s eyes were opened to see, and through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, Saul was brought out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

Saul had been Christ’s enemy, but Christ graciously forgave him and transformed him into a friend.

By God's grace, Saul had been unconditionally forgiven and unconditionally restored by Christ. Jesus then sent out Saul as his chosen instrument to bring that same gift of reconciliation to the world. He received grace and now Saul proclaims this grace to all people.

Through God's wisdom, our Lord chose to send the message of grace to sinners through sinners. Who better than Saul, who called himself the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), to speak the comfort that Christ is the friend of sinners?

[Forgiveness Isn't Easy]

Even though Saul was forgiven by God, forgiveness from fellow Christians wasn't as easy. You see, they remembered how Saul terrorized them. They remembered his threats against them. Eternally, Saul was forgiven, but temporally, he was seen as the same old Saul. Even Ananias wasn't rearing to visit Saul, until Jesus calmed his fears by calling Saul His chosen instrument.

We might not have participated in the organized persecution of Christians, but we are every bit dependent on God's saving grace as Saul.

We each come into this life with a fallen, sinful nature that looks in toward itself rather than up to the Lord. We, by nature have a mind that is hostile to God and we do not want to submit to God's moral law. In short, we are all by nature enemies of God.

Our sinful nature wants to withhold forgiveness. Our sinful nature likes having a sense of power over one another.

Likewise, our sinful nature doesn't like saying, "I'm sorry," either. Our sinful nature always thinks of itself as always right.

Our sinful nature does not want to forgive others who wrong us. This is how the early Christians thought about Saul.

So, when someone who has terrorized you suddenly desires to be your friend, how would you react? Wouldn't you be cautious? Would you wonder why? Would you forgive them if this person said they were truly sorry for what they had done?

In time, Saul was trusted by the fellow Christians since he never wavered when he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues saying: "***He is the Son of God***" (Acts 9:20).

As a sinner forgiven by Christ, Saul received God's grace and we too, receive God's grace. The Holy Spirit inspired Saul to write about God's grace more than a hundred times in His epistles, which gives every Christian confidence that through Christ's death and bodily resurrection, everyone who trusts in Jesus as Lord is eternally saved by grace through faith in Jesus alone.

[Chosen Instrument]

Now, Jesus continually calls those considered least likely to serve His plan of salvation. No one expected Saul – a persecutor of the faith – to become a messenger of the gospel. No one also expected a ragtag group of fishermen, who didn't always understand Jesus, to become messengers of the gospel. No one would expect Peter to be forgiven for denying Jesus three times as his Lord faced trial. But that is exactly what Jesus does.

Jesus said to Peter three times, ***“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”*** (John 21:15, 16, 17). And for three times, Peter responds in repentance saying, ***“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you”*** (John 21:15, 16, 17). Jesus absolves Peter saying: ***“Feed my sheep”*** (John 21:17).

In His threefold exchange with Peter, Jesus restored His disciple to service to Him and His flock. Jesus gave him grace.

You see, our own past sins and failures often make us feel unworthy to serve God. We may think, “Why would God ever forgive me? I wouldn't forgive myself.” But Jesus continues to comfort our souls with forgiveness of sins and with compassion. He gives us grace.

This is extremely true for Saul. Saul was on the fast track to influence and power among the Jewish authorities. He was rounding up Christians that he believed deserved what they received by the Sanhedrin. Saul may have eventually become a leader among the Jewish authorities, but instead God chose him to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles, Saul uses his Greek translation of his name, Paul. As now God's chosen instrument, Paul becomes a special messenger of the Gospel.

As a Roman citizen, Paul is now able to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ far and wide throughout the Roman world. At the same time, Peter continues to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ among the Jews.

[Our Call]

Today, the Christian Church continues where the apostles left off. You see, all of us here today are also chosen instruments of God. Just as Christ did for Saul and Peter, He came to each one of us personally to give us the new life that He purchased for us upon the cross and in His resurrection. By water and the Word, He shined His light into our hearts. Having paid our ransom upon the cross, He came to us personally to free us from sin, death and Satan.

Just as Christ cared for Paul and Peter in their mission work, Christ continues coming to us to give us forgiveness and strength for our weak faith in the Lord's Supper. He comes to us through His Body and Blood in the bread and wine to restore us as His chosen instruments.

Though we have not earned this, it is given to us as God's free gift in Christ through His death and resurrection. This is grace.

As forgiven, redeemed and justified like Paul and Peter, we are chosen instruments of God. As chosen instruments, we live out the one true Christian faith in our words and actions. We live our lives forgiven and tell others of the grace we have received.

We were enemies, but through Jesus Christ, we have been transformed from enemies into friends. We have been transformed into Christ's chosen instruments.

So, if someone asks you about your hope, we are to proclaim like Paul and Peter that everyone who repents and trusts in Jesus is no longer God's enemy, but is God's friend. It doesn't matter the sin of thought, word, or deed. Through repentance, we are forgiven!

For this, we should celebrate God's grace! This is exactly what we do each Sunday morning in the Divine Service. We celebrate what God has done for us and what God continues to do for us! In response to God's grace, we tell others what God has done for you and for me as His chosen instruments! We were enemies of God, but by grace through faith in Jesus, we are forgiven!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠