

Sermon: Brother Saul
Text: Acts 9:1-19a
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Context: WWPC
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*He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him,
'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'*

Acts 9:4

Like the story I just read, the story I'm about to tell you is a little hard to hear.

And because I've never had the experience of watching people get up as a group and walk out on me while I'm preaching, I want to assure you from the start that it's a good story, and a hopeful one.

It's also an important and timely story, which is why I want to start with it this morning.

It's about a young man named Zak Ebrahim. Zak is an American-born peace activist from Pennsylvania. He's the son of an American mother, and an Egyptian father.

He recently gave a talk about how he came to find his vocation as a peace activist. He started the talk this way:

On November 5th, 1990, a man named El-Sayyid Nosair walked into a hotel in Manhattan and assassinated Rabbi Meir Kahane, the leader of the Jewish Defense League.

Nosair was initially found not guilty of the murder, but while serving time on lesser charges, he and other men began planning attacks on a dozen New York City landmarks, including tunnels, synagogues and the United Nations headquarters.¹

¹ Zak's full talk, which has been viewed more than four million times, can be found here:
https://www.ted.com/talks/zak_ebrahim_i_am_the_son_of_a_terrorist_here_s_how_i_chose_peace

Pause right there. As I noted a moment ago, our text for today is the story of the most famous conversion in Christian history, and maybe all of history.

It opens with a line that sounds like it's describing a character out of Game of Thrones: *Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*

A trained lawyer, Saul has made a career out of hunting down early Christian converts and in at least one famous case, having them stoned to death.

But by the end of the chapter, in one of the great narrative twists of all time, Saul has himself converted to this new faith, this new way of being in the world.

This freshly minted convert takes a new name, the Apostle Paul. And he immediately channels his religious zeal into becoming the most important spokesperson for the Christian faith after only Jesus himself.

Given all of that, you might expect that we're now going to learn how El-Sayyid Nosair gave up his violent ways and devoted himself to making peace in the world, and spreading love and kindness instead.

But that's not how this story goes, because it's not about him.

Let's pick up Zak's story where he left off a moment ago:

Thankfully, those plans [to blow stuff up] were foiled by an FBI informant. Sadly, the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center was not. Nosair would eventually be convicted for his involvement in the plot. El-Sayyid Nosair is my father.

What makes Zak's story so potent is that it would be perfectly reasonable to have expected him to follow in his father's footsteps.

As a boy, he was raised on a steady diet of dogma and hate -- the two staples of religious extremism. So, yes, you might have expected Zak to become a terrorist just like his dad, and to need to be converted himself from a life of violence and terror.

Certainly his father and his father's friends expected Zak to follow in his dad's footsteps and go down that same road. When he was a young boy, they once took him to a shooting range on Long Island.

It turns out Zak was a terrible marksman. With his final shot, he missed the target altogether and instead hit the red warning light on top of the stanchion.

This was quite a feat, as the target was only some thirty yards away--an average pitcher could reliably hit it with a baseball. But when that stray bullet blew out the safety light, it caused the whole structure to burst into flames.

One of the men watching, a man whom Zak called "Uncle" turned to Zak's father and said, in Arabic, "Ibn abuh." Like father, like son.

He did not mean that in the sense that, like you, your boy is a terrible marksman. He meant it in the sense of, "This kid's gonna blow some stuff up someday."

Except he did not do that. Zak was converted to a better way. His conversion was not as dramatic as that of Saul's. He did not see a blinding light or hear the voice of the living Christ questioning him, calling him to embrace a different way of living, a different vocation.

At least not literally. You could make a case that this was in fact what happened, that the living God -- the God of Isaac and of Esau, the God embodied in Jesus Christ -- did call Zak to a different way.

It just happened less dramatically for him than it did for the Apostle Paul. More like it might happen to you and me. In fact, more like it did happen to me.

The conversion began when Zak met a Jewish boy at a national youth convention. Zak's friend did not know Zak came from a Muslim household, and Zak did not know his new friend prayed to Yahweh, not Allah. Although now I suspect both Zak and his friend would say these are just two different names for the same God.

At the time they just connect as young men, with similar interests, similar hopes, similar dreams.

That was the first step in Zak's conversion. And then his story took a turn that is remarkably like one that happened in my own life some years ago.

Per the tenets of his faith, Zak was raised to believe that homosexuality was wrong and that the people who practiced it were unclean sinners.

And then, out in the wider world, the world beyond the confines of his religious community, he finally started to meet gay people. Their basic goodness, their kindness to him, their love for Zak and for others, forced him to reconsider the religious precepts -- the religious dogma -- he'd been taught as a young Muslim boy.

Plus, Zak was a chubby kid growing up. He also looked like a bit of an outsider due to his mixed racial heritage. So he knew all too well what it was like to be judged and bullied for things about himself he could not control or easily change, if at all.

So Zak was ready to be converted. He was primed to transcend the confines of the dogma and hate that had defined his religious experience to that point, and to embrace a new life, and a new vocation as a peace activist.

All of this is to say that when I hear the claim: "People can't change," I don't believe that, because Zak did. And I did, too.

In my case, I don't deserve any of the credit for the change I experienced. I, too, was raised to believe homosexuality was wrong and that people who identified as gay were unclean sinners. My boyhood religion was not a hateful one, but it was dogmatic, especially on this point.

Like Zak, my conversion started when I finally met some of these "unclean" people.

It was effected by friends who cared enough about me to stay in relationship with me even when I held views about them that were ignorant and judgmental and dogmatic.

In the end, it was their love and their kindness and their simple friendship that changed me. Not argument, not Bible study, but relationship.

You could make a case that the main theme of the book of Acts is about that very thing: about how relationships change us, and convert us.

In the chapters preceding this one, we see stories like the one we looked at two weeks ago, about an Ethiopian eunuch who decides to be baptized. And he puts one of the early church leaders on the spot by asking: *What is to prevent me from being baptized?* Absolutely nothing.

But there are other stories like this: about how a Samaritan -- a member of the reviled class -- was welcomed into the community, and how a Roman Centurion -- a literal enemy, a man armed to the teeth -- was received into this new community devoted to love and peace.

Per the customary standards of that day, none of these people would have passed a membership test for inclusion in the community of God's people. Too black, too unclean, too Gentile, too different.

Sadly, to this day the church struggles to live into and practice this ethic of radical love and inclusion.

It's why the stories in Acts matter so very much. They are the perfect sequel to the Gospels. A series of case studies of what it means and what it looks like when the followers of Jesus go out and put his teachings into practice.

But here's the thing, the very important thing. The lesson is not just what happens to the people the disciples encounter, to the converts, to the outsiders whom they welcome.

The lesson is also about what happens to them. How this ethic of radical love and inclusion makes more of them. How they become bigger and better because of it.

The story we read today is without doubt the most famous conversion narrative in the history of Christianity. But -- did you notice -- it's not the only conversion that happens in the course of the story.

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.'

But Ananias answered, '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.'"

You can imagine how that little command went over with Ananias: "Are you, sure this is the right guy, God? Cause I gotta tell ya, his resume is really sketchy."

“I’m sure. Go.”

“But if I could just point out . . .”

“I’m sure. Go.”

So Ananias went, the text says, and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul.’

This past Friday, while I was en route between point A and point B, I needed to get a quick bite to eat. So I stopped in a fast food restaurant. Not something I do often but there I was.

While I was eating my chicken chalupa, a man walked in with his young son. The two had just pulled up in a rough looking pick up.

The father was dressed in a t-shirt and a baseball cap that I would bet money he bought at Walmart. Like every human being ever, I made some immediate judgements about the man. I might as well admit I put him in the same category in which I used put gay people: unclean sinner.

And then I watched him put his arm around his young son’s shoulder and told him he could order anything he wanted. And I continued to watch as the man shepherded his son over to soda fountain and helped his little boy fill his gigantic cup with root beer.

And how he gave the boy a loving rub on his head afterward, and how he talked so sweetly to his son after they sat down about how they were going to go fishing the next day, clearly conveying to this precious eight-year-old that he was the apple of his daddy’s eye.

Having finished my meal, I walked out to my vehicle and noticed a bumper sticker in the back window of the man’s truck. Sure enough, as I suspected, he voted for a different candidate than I did last November.

Then I wondered, when was the last time I broke bread with someone who votes differently from me? When was the last time I had a chalupa and a root beer with someone who holds different views from me about climate change or immigration?

If I ever had a chance to befriend that man I saw in Taco Bell on Friday, it is possible that over time my friendship could serve to change him, in the way that my dorm mates' friendship changed me way back in the day.

Perhaps if he was lucky enough to be in relationship with me, a thoughtful Presbyterian minister, the experience could convert him, such that in the next election he might vote for my preferred candidate for president. Or, heaven forbid, start coming to church here, and parking his pick-up in our parking lot.

But of course that presumes I'm right and he's wrong. And obviously that's true. My political preferences are smarter than his. My theology and my world view are more biblically based.

And the moment I start believing this, I've betrayed the core values of my faith. I've taken my commitments to love and diversity and inclusivity, and traded them all for what amounts to narrow-minded religious dogma.

Which is why, as I drove away, I realized that I am the one who needs to be converted, again.