

Reclaiming an Inclusive Church – Part 2
Acts 9: 1-6
April 22, 2007

There are images in last week's Chronicle that I cannot get out of my head. If you've read Thursday's paper you may have the same problem. They are the photos that Cho Seung-Hui mailed to NBC between the two murder scenes of the dormitory and class building on the campus of Virginia Tech. You see the blank stare of a boy holding two automatic pistols; the grimace of a hammer-wielding youth; and the pleasant smile of a boy who is about the same age as my older daughter. All three of these photos are of the same person. But as much as those images are stuck in my head, it is the image of his words in that article, captured on DVD, that haunt me even more. Here's what he said: "You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience. Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people." Now we can dismiss those words as those of a deeply disturbed young man. We can bristle at this self-centered, twisted person. But we also have to come to grips with this very sad reality that somehow this young man got this way. What must have happened to this man for him to turn out this way and then to destroy thirty-two lives and then take his own? How did he become so isolated, so angry, and so explosive? Believe me, I do not intend to sentimentalize this young man. But I do have to wonder if there were opportunities to turn around this life before it exploded on itself and on others.

Lives do get turned around, you know? But they don't turn around themselves. This morning we will look at a turnaround story. We will look at a man whose murderous threats to wipe out the Jesus movement were converted into the greatest story of evangelism in the New Testament and maybe in the history of the world. This is a

story that we tend to sensationalize. We look at the *miracle* on the Road to Damascus. For that reason, when God works in our lives in converting ways, we say things like, “I didn’t experience a road to Damascus-like conversion.” But I want to look again at this famous story in a way that de-mystifies what might have really happened. The facts are all there around this story. Just like in our lives the most powerful stuff is what comes before and after the conversion miracle – the flashing lights.

This is the second week of a sermon series that I am entitling, *Reclaiming an Inclusive Church*. I believe Paul didn’t get the idea of inclusivity from a lightning bolt or a thunderstorm or a voice in his head. He got it from the real heroes that are the bookends of this story: Stephen and Ananias. Now once Paul got it he took this inclusiveness to the ends of the known world. He said it wasn’t about eating the right foods, or about your birthright, or about circumcision. It is about how your heart is. But it was revealed to him in a larger story that involved these two rather minor characters from the Book of Acts. And the message to you and me is clear. If these minor characters can get it and transmit it to the greatest evangelist of the first century, so can you and I.

Let’s look at the larger story for a moment. Actually, the anthem you heard just a few moments ago captures the emotions of this larger story perfectly. What happened to elicit the guilt and anguish that we may have felt in this piece? Saul (who would become Paul) enters the stage of the Acts of the Apostles in the scene late in chapter seven. The first martyr of the Christian faith has preached a convicting sermon to the Sanhedrin, the chief Jewish Council. His sermon is a survey of all of Hebrew history. He concludes by accusing their parents of killing all the prophets whom God has sent them. He then looks

to the heavens and talks of how he sees Jesus at the right hand of God. The Council becomes an angry mob, chases Stephen out of town and begins to stone him to death. In a scene that imitates that of the crucifixion Stephen says, “God don’t hold this sin against them.” And he dies. The witnesses to this scene lay their robes at the feet of Saul (symbolic of honor and the request of his approval of their actions). As chapter eight begins the reader is told that Saul was in hearty agreement with Stephen’s execution. So at the beginning of our scene today Saul is full of the murderous accusations and recollections of this graphic scene. He is carrying hate and self-righteousness, along with his letters from the High Priest, as he seeks out followers of the Way into Damascus. It is at this point that blinding lights and voices begin in our miraculous scene.

You know the eye is an amazing device. Its hardware that allows us our sense of vision is beyond my ability to describe it. But it is also known as the “window to the soul.” When you become blind something physically must happen to affect its operation or the operation of the optic nerve. You don’t go blind for no reason. What happened on that road? It may have been a miracle. But we also know that there is a temporary malady of the eye affected by many causes called *amaurosis*. Extreme emotional distress caused by Paul’s psychic change and spiritual reorientation could have resulted in blindness not originating in deterioration of the eye or optic nerve. This is *amaurosis*. Remember the feeling you got during our anthem today? Multiply that feeling by 100 and you can imagine how amaurosis could happen. General psychotherapy can result in a dramatic cure of this kind of ailment. In Acts 13:10-12 Elymas the sorcerer suffered this ailment at the suggestion of Paul. But in this scene Paul exits stage right blind and completely dependent upon his company.

Enter Ananias. Ananias is one of the early followers of Christ in Damascus. Ananias may have been on the run himself, running from Saul and his persecution. But Ananias is directed in a dream to come to Saul and to lay hands on his eyes and heal him of his blindness. Now Ananias is no fool. He knows that to do this healing, as a Christian, that he must do this in the name of Jesus Christ. He says to the messenger, “Wait. This Saul is a persecutor and he seeks to root out all who call Jesus Lord.” The greater vision of Saul’s ministry in the name of the Lord is revealed and he submits to God’s authority. So the moment of reconciliation, the moment of incredible inclusion even of an enemy of the Christ, comes to us late in chapter nine, as a bookend to the stoning of Stephen when Ananias lays his hands on Saul and says, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, the one who you encountered on the road to Damascus, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Does that give you goose bumps? That would be like a victim of the death chamber in Auschwitz coming to Hitler and healing him. It would be like a student of Virginia Tech, hiding under his desk, coming to Cho and laying hands on him to heal him of his mental illness that results in his hate. Scales fell from the eyes of Saul. A heavy weight was lifted from his soul so that the window, clouded over with the dirt of hatred, could be clear again and he could see. That’s my version of what happened to Saul in Damascus.

How would I know? I don’t, but in a much more gradual way the scales of prejudice and misunderstanding have fallen from my eyes so that I have learned to include everyone in my vision of God’s salvation plan. In some ways I am the last guy to become an advocate for full inclusion of GLBT people. I was raised to be a lifelong Republican, you know. Katie will tell you. But God had a different plan. I learned, little

by little, even as a teenager, that God created me to love diversity and reach out to those unlike me in the classroom and in my neighborhood. My two best friends in my two high schools were Cesar Noble, whose mother immigrated from Cuba right after the Bay of Pigs and Raef Hussein, a native of Egypt, whose Dad was the Press Secretary under Anwar Saddat. I learned the enduring lessons of friendship in the face of prejudice and misunderstanding. Never have I had a fiercer advocate or truer friend than Raef Hussein. “Ralph” as we called him in those days was the high school friend in Washington, D.C. who drove all the way to Dallas to visit me in college. In college I befriended a fellow freshman named Nick. Nick was a Cajun from New Orleans. Nick also had no face. He was badly burned in a fire as a child and his life was saved but his face was hideously scarred. I didn’t do anything to earn Nick’s friendship, or Raef’s or Cesar’s friendship. It just seemed to happen as our souls passed by chance. But as I reflect on the formation of those friendships and the lessons that each of them taught me, I can now put in perspective my calling to Bering Memorial UMC. Though I was blind at the time – I was just acting in very particular ways to be a friend to those who had been friends to me – I now see a larger connection. I see that by seeking particular friendships with those different from you that you get glimpses into God’s plan for universal love, acceptance, and justice. I told Jim Welch, our District Superintendent, and Janice Huie, our bishop, that I had never been an advocate for anyone in my ministry. They sent me anyway. When I met with Bering’s SPRC I stumbled over every question. They said, “Andy, we’ll work on that,” and accepted me anyway. Now here I am, anticipating Annual Conference next month, preparing to be your advocate, declaring my candidacy for General and Jurisdictional Conference, so that I may join forces with others so that

justice may come to the United Methodist Church. Thanks to you, thanks to Cesar, thanks to Raef, the scales have fallen from my eyes.

John Newton was the most unlikely of abolitionists. A short story of his life is this: Newton was born a son to an English shipmaster. After learning seafaring from his father, his father planned for him to take up a position on a sugar plantation in Jamaica. John was forced into military service and tried to desert. He was imprisoned and reduced to the rank of common seaman. At his request he became a servant to a slave trader. Returning to England in 1748 his ship encountered a severe storm and he feared his own death. He awoke in the middle of the night with the ship filled with water. He prayed and said the Lord's Prayer. Having survived this experience his conversion began. He began to read his Bible and accepted the doctrines of the Christian faith. From the date he arrived in England – May 12th – his life changed as he avoided profanity, gambling and drinking. But he continued to participate in the slave trade for several years. Newton had other near death experiences and strides in his conversion but it was not until seven years later that he gave up the slave trading business altogether. He began to excel as a lay minister and applied for the Anglican priesthood. After what he felt was his true conversion to Christianity he came to deeply regret and repent of his involvement in the slave trade. He later joined William Wilberforce in the campaign for abolition and wrote scathing essays against the trade. Perhaps among his greatest contributions was in persuading Wilberforce to stay in Parliament rather than enter the ministry. Wilberforce spent the next five decades in Parliament working for the complete abolition of slavery in the British Empire.

Newton's tombstone reads, "John Newton, Clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy."

What would your tombstone include? Does it include the statement that you have been a persecutor, an enemy of God? Does it state how God has shown you that even those who you opposed have been revealed to you as God's precious children? In what ways – not with thunderbolts or lightning or voices in the night – has God whispered to you – a persecutor of the full gospel – that you must include people you would have never considered into God's unfolding story of wildly inclusive love?