

Acts 9:1-19a

The embattled and doomed messiah had taught his disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. And then he had been killed by *his* enemies. But then he came out the other side of death and was alive. So evidently the early Christian communities—or at least the one to which Ananias belonged—were willing to try to practice this difficult teaching.

Saul of Tarsus had been doing his best to stamp out the Jesus movement. As an educated and zealous Pharisee, he was alarmed by the blasphemous claim that God would allow the messiah to be crucified—both because it's a death and because Leviticus says there is a curse on anyone who hangs on a tree. Paul exercised as much force as he could muster to intimidate and silence members of this movement so that it would die out. He was, as we can tell from his letters, a forceful personality, and he certainly had a way with words, so you can imagine the intensity and focus with which he opposed the Christian heresy. In Luke's account of Paul's call, his momentum is stopped by the risen Christ himself, in a light that blinds Paul and causes him to fall off his horse. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Christ says from the heavens, and instructs him to go into the city and wait to be told what to do.

The divine voice from the heavens stops Paul's momentum, but for the action to continue, a human being must take action. Ananias dreams that he must go and visit this enemy, whom God intends to use as an instrument to spread the good news. He's afraid, and I hope we all understand how well-grounded his fear is. But he goes, and once inside the room with Saul, he touches him and calls him "Brother Saul." Because Jesus had said, "Love your enemies."

We spend a lot of time analyzing Paul's theology, trying to pry it loose from centuries of using Martin Luther's filter of works versus grace, placing him in his own time and theological context. We take note of his enviable certainty, his lack of hesitation in calling out what he considers to be false teachings. We may also speculate about how he operated on the ground, opening up his leatherworking shop in a new city, chatting with customers, sounding out who might be interested in the unlikely story of a Jewish messiah come to interrupt human history. But none of this would have been possible without the courageous love of Ananias. What I take from this reading today is God's insistence on working through invitation and not coercion.

Saul had been trying to spread correct belief through intimidation and violence, and it kind of worked . . . but in Ananias' vision, the Lord told him that now *Saul* will find himself suffering, and for the sake of the gospel. Others will use violence on him, and he'll withstand it or (ultimately) succumb to it willingly because of how much the gospel means to him. So I had to think about love of enemy again, why it bobs up over and over, and what is so powerful about love of enemy that we continue to try to practice it in this painful world that is so in need of a forceful and coercive intervention!

The Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton came to the conviction that Christianity is not about the love of ideals and principles, as he had once believed, but about love of people. He insisted that love must grow to include even those who are radically different from us, who threaten us. He wrote, "We should not be too sure of having found Christ until we have found him in that part of humanity that is most remote from our own."

Lofty words, you may say, but isn't that how monks and mystics talk? But Merton was also deeply engaged in the world. Writing to his friend Jim Forest as the Vietnam War raged,

Merton said that one must not depend on the hope of results, because you might not see them. Instead, he said, you narrow your focus to the rightness of the work itself, and then from there, narrow even further until you struggle less for an idea and more for specific people. In the end, he wrote, “it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.”ⁱ

Merton said that the real hope is not that we achieve what we intend, but that God will make something good out of it that we can't see. Our part is to be embodied, like we are, and look for God in the embodied world—because Incarnation means God is present here.

So let me tell you about a miracle of transformation, transformation from enmity to love. In his autobiography, the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote of being taken in 1944 by his mother to see 20,000 German war prisoners marching through the streets of Moscow.

The pavements swarmed with onlookers, cordoned off by soldiers and police. The crowd was mostly women—Russian women with hands roughened by hard work, lips untouched by lipstick, and with thin hunched shoulders which had borne half the burden of the war. Every one of them must have had a father or a husband, a brother or a son killed by the Germans. They gazed with hatred in the direction from which the column was to appear.

At last we saw it. The generals marched at the head, massive chins stuck out, lips folded disdainfully, their whole demeanour meant to show superiority over their plebeian victors.

“They smell of perfume, the bastards,” someone in the crowd said with hatred. The women were clenching their fists. The soldiers and policemen had all they could do to hold them back.

All at once something happened to them. They saw German soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty, blood stained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down. The street became dead silent—the only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches. Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman's shoulder, saying, “Let me through.” There must have been something about her that made him step aside. She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a coloured handkerchief and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he

was tottering on his feet. And now from every side women were running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people.

What I find inspiring in that story is not the illusion that friendliness will always be met with success, but that it even happened at all, and that the crowd were able to shift from their well-earned loathing to kindness. But there is never a guarantee that love will be met with love; there is always the real possibility that one may stick one's head out and get it cut off. That's what's so powerful about Ananias' gesture to Paul.

Jim Forest quotes a retired British officer who asked derisively, "What would you have had us do, drop Bibles on Germany?" and today I think about Ukraine's desperate pleas for more weapons against Russia and I want them to have a ton of effective weapons. But that's not actually a decision that we have to make before we look for ways to love our enemies; it's at the level of an important intellectual discussion but not a personal orientation. It's easier to argue about weapons for Ukraine than it is to examine my own enmity. But it's also less fruitful.

I'm very intrigued by Thomas Merton's assertion that it's the reality of personal relationships that saves everything. We are, in fact, embodied; we live under the law of gravity, and concrete things matter. I'm going to bet that Ananias was able to care enough about reaching out to his enemy because he belonged to a church that practiced caring about others in embodied ways. He had some muscle memory. So because of a few unnamed church members of Ananias, this obscure man was able to approach his enemy with authentic care, to call him "brother," and to lay peaceful hands on him. And like water turned into wine, the zealot crusader against the Jesus movement became its propagator and theologian, forceful

now rhetorically but never violent again. I don't know if Ananias ever saw those results—as Thomas Merton noted, we often don't. Maybe he was okay with that. Maybe he would have agreed with Merton that “in the end it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.” As Jim Forest writes, this is another way of saying that God is with us: everyone is knit together in personal relationships. God is present now and not only in a past inhabited by our long-dead ancestors. It is because of God's presence here and now that we can dare to think of any kind of miracles and transformation in our own lives and in the way human beings live together.

Let us pray: God who calls us into the impossible, give us the hope and the love to follow your impossible call to service, that we may be transformed. Amen.

ⁱ Jim Forest, *Making Friends of Enemies: Reflections on the Teachings of Jesus*. New York: Crossroad, 1987, p. 25.

“One of the things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better.

These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive.

Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.”

- Annie Dillard