

Acts of the Apostles
Eleventh “Think About”
St Philip’s United Church of Christ

Reading for the week: Acts 9:1-30

Chapter 9 of the Book of Acts presents a first look at the story that will dominate the later chapters: the extraordinary ministry of Paul the Apostle.

That he was called an apostle is in itself a strange and surprising thing. Paul, known at first by the name “Saul,” had never met Jesus, as the other apostles had. He was never a follower during the time of Jesus’ earthly life. Moreover, in his effort to be loyal to what he understood as right belief and in his zeal for punishing the sins of blasphemy and heresy, he is reported in Acts to have actually joined in the persecution of those in the Jewish community who had become followers of Jesus.

In chapter 9, Luke tells us this and also tells the story of Paul’s conversion to the way of Jesus. Notice that I worded this carefully: I did not say conversion from Judaism to Christianity. That would be inaccurate, since Paul, even following his conversion, was a lifelong Jew. Like the other apostles, he was a Jewish believer who came to believe that Jesus’ Way was a new pathway for spreading the message given by God to Israel. This is surprising enough, given the description of Saul’s militant background, but there is something else that is remarkable about this story of transformation. Did you notice it? Paul is changed without asking to be, wanting to be, or learning anything that led him to be. Whether this is an absolutely accurate account of Paul’s experience may be questioned, but according to the Book of Acts, Saul the religious zealot who persecuted the followers of Jesus literally had nothing to do with his own calling to the Way of Christ.

What do you think Luke is trying to tell us in this story? We find in it several teachings that are commonly held by Christians: the belief that we don’t choose God, but God chooses us; the conviction that God is able to transform even the darkest heart, and that no one is irredeemable; the faith that the growth of the early church is itself a work of the Spirit of God, not dependent upon human effort or goodness. Or perhaps Luke wants us to know that the writings of Paul the Apostle, the very first writings that began to define our Christian beliefs about Jesus the Christ, written even before the Gospels, were true and faithful expressions of the Spirit of God at work within him.

Don’t you marvel at how clearly religious zealots think they see the world, and how accurately they believe they understand the hearts of others? When we think our truth is pure and that the truth expressed by others is not, we run the risk of finding ourselves opposed to the very spiritual truths we are seeking to protect. Perhaps the false clarity of vision is what was taken away from Saul when he was blinded. When his sight was restored, he saw the world differently than he had ever seen it before, looking now, perhaps, through eyes made humble by the possibility that he had been wrong. Having our eyes opened to a truth we did not know is a deeply valuable religious experience.

(This weekly “think about” is printed as an attachment to our Sunday bulletin at St Philip’s United Church of Christ, 10708 Lavinia Drive, St Louis, MO 63123. It may also be found on our website. We encourage you to make comments and also to share the page with any one you feel may enjoy seeing it. We are a congregation of the United Church of Christ, a progressive Christian denomination that is committed to inclusive ministry in the spirit of Christ’s prayer “that all God’s people may be one.” Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor)