



## **Eat, Feed, Follow**

### **Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19**

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In the early 2000s, Addison Road was a successful Christian rock band from Dallas, Texas. One of Addison Road's hit song "What Do I Know of Holy?" is a celebration of the mystery of God. The singer asks, "Are you fire? Are you fury? Are you sacred? Are you beautiful? What do I know of holy?" Indeed, what do we know of Holy?

Today's reading from Acts tells us the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. This is a significant event which is mentioned eight times in the New Testament. The greatest persecutor of the church became its greatest apostle, eventually traveling over 10,000 miles to spread the gospel before dying a martyr's death in Rome.

Before his dramatic conversion, Saul, later called Paul, "breathed out murderous threats." He imprisoned believers and tried to exterminate the church. He was proud of his righteous zeal. (Philippians 3:4-6)

No wonder Jesus' disciples were in hiding and behind locked doors. There were serious threats to the emerging Church from both the religious and the political leadership. To the eyes of the Jewish leadership, the followers of the Way, as Christians were first called, were blasphemous insisting on the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. To the Romans, they were dangerous to the social order, running around declaring Lord one other than Caesar.

Even as an old man Paul was haunted by his wretched past. To his young friend Timothy, he confessed: "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor," and "the worst of sinners." (1 Timothy 1:12-20. See also Acts 22 and 26)

But, like Peter, Paul made peace with his broken past and his shadow self: "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward." (Philippians 3:13-14)

In Acts 9, Luke recalls Saul's conversion in a dramatic way. The risen Jesus is on the loose, changing people's lives. Appearing not just to his disciples in Jerusalem but also to Saul and casting him off his high horse. In his commentary to the book of Acts, Willie Jennings recalls that Saul is part of an intentional persecution. His intense dislike for the followers of Jesus led him to extreme means in deference to God. Jennings writes: "He killed in the name of righteousness. No one is more dangerous than one with the power to take life... Such a person is a closed circle relying on the inner coherence of their logic. Their authority confirms their argument."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings, Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible

Saul was convinced, as were the Jewish leaders, that his passionate devotion to Yahweh legitimized his hatred for the Christians and gave him the authority to persecute them.

How ironic that the most antagonistic and vicious attacks on people come from those who claim to be serving God! And how sad that religious violence should negate that which is precious to God, wanted and honored by God, namely the sacredness of bodies created in the image of God and imbued with God's Spirit of life.

All around the globe we see even today victims of religious violence, bigotry, and misplaced zeal. But who are we to claim that we have authority over other people's lives and declare legal control if not ownership over their bodies? What makes us think that we have the right to decide for others what faith they ought to embrace, what they are to wear, and how they should worship.<sup>2</sup>

Because Saul has an enemy image of the Christians and sees them totally objectionable, he can't get past his theological differences with them and is unable to see them in a new light. Consequently, he can't relate to their humanity and finds them worthy of persecution even unto death.

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow Jesus clearly identifies with those who are harassed in life and even persecuted in the name of God. Jesus tells Saul, "It is me, Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Whether people are motivated by religious fervor or political gain, they better be clear that it is the risen Jesus they are up against.

Professor Raj Nadella explains in his commentary to Acts 9: "In locating itself in and with the victims of Saul's violence, the voice was not just expressing solidarity with them, but was also asking Saul to see the divine in those he was targeting. In identifying with the people, the voice was suggesting to Saul that inasmuch as he was targeting them, he was targeting Jesus himself. For Saul, the site of encounter with the divine transforms into a site of encounter with the humans he was persecuting. The profound encounter had a vertical dimension, but it also had a horizontal dimension."<sup>3</sup>

Paul is said to have remained blind for three days. In biblical terms, this is a death and resurrection experience.

The risen Lord does not show anger toward Saul. He doesn't make a theological argument with Saul. When the voice confronts Saul, this is for him a moment of realization of his own proclivity toward violence in interacting with others with whom he disagrees. Just as Jesus offered peace and not condemnation to the disciples who had abandoned him and locked themselves in the house for fear of the Jews, here, on the road to Damascus, Jesus offers grace and forgiveness, calling Saul to a higher ministry in the Spirit of Truth. So, he incites him to go on to Damascus where he will be given further instructions.

To Ananias, the Lord reveals that "[Saul] is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he

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<sup>2</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2022/04/25/uscirf-list-afghanistan-as-religious-liberty-violator-watchdog-urges-state-department/>

<sup>3</sup> [Commentary on Acts 9:1-6 \[7-20\] - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

must suffer for the sake of my name.” Borrowing Martin Luther King's admonition "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

I learn much more, qualitatively and quantitatively speaking, when I am loved than when I am scolded. I learn better when I am included than when I am excluded. I am more apt to change attitude and behavior when handled with compassion than with contempt. I guess we all like more honey in our life than judgment and harsh words. I guess our brain feels less threatened and doesn't need to engage in protective mode when approached with kindness and forgiveness.

Saul eventually joins the Jesus movement, but what stands out in this story is not theological or doctrinal, but the profound ways in which people can be transformed when they acknowledge the pain and damage of forcing others to see the world as they do. The Jesus encounter unlocks grace for Saul, and he is empowered to “un-see” them as enemies: scales fall off his eyes and he can acknowledge them as fellow human beings who, through their wounds, have redeemed him.

Saul gets baptized by Ananias. A radical act for a convinced and convicted Pharisees. But how can one better mark up the profound grace received? How can one say more efficiently: “I see the light” (Job 12:22), “I belong to the Lord” (Isaiah 44:5), and “What can separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom 8:35-37)? How best can one render the message “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20)?

In today's gospel, grace abounds even on the shore as the disciples, following the resurrection of Jesus, don't know what to do with themselves. According to John, they have had Jesus show up in their midst already twice. To their credit, they didn't scatter; they didn't leave and went home. They stuck together. They had each other. And by now Jesus has already appeared to several of them and has commissioned them to bring a message of reconciliation to the world.

But how do you do ministry when Jesus is long gone? What does it mean to be a renewed community and the beating heart of Jesus? Can one be a disciple even when Jesus is not around in flesh and blood?

According to the post-resurrection stories, some of the disciples, particularly the women, have tried to hold on to Jesus, and he told them not to cling to him. They have to let go of him and prepare to receive the Holy Spirit instead. But what does it mean to live in the Spirit of Jesus?

In their perplexity, the men go and do what is familiar to them: they go fishing. It gives them something to do. Some distraction and orientation in their grief. They catch nothing that night but they don't seem to mind. Is this when they put a bumper sticker on their boat that reads: a bad day fishing is better than a good day at work?

But then...someone from the shore calls out to them and he encourages them to try again. And they succeed...abundantly. Upon seen that abundance, the disciples recognize the Lord. Peter puts on a robe, reminiscent of Baptism, and jumps into the waters just as he ran to the tomb a few weeks earlier: no second thoughts. The rest of the disciples come to shore hauling the big catch and find a meal already prepared for them. And they rejoice. The risen Christ reveals himself in the breaking of the bread and in abundance.

Water and a meal. This is also what ends Saul's conversion story: he gets baptized and for the first time in three days has something to eat.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the means of grace we turn to as an anchor in our life. How important it is for the Christian community to come together regularly (Hebrews 10:25) to share a holy meal.

The last conversation between Jesus and Peter, the threefold call to love Christ by feeding his flock, is a model for us. He feeds us and then sends us out to feed and care for his sheep. This is a huge task. How are we to do it? Where are we to start? Thank God for Jesus' last command: "Follow me." He'll teach us the Way.

May the Spirit of the risen Lord feed and guide us. Amen.