

We are going to be reading from the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. This is the story of the conversion of Saul. Two chapters later in Acts Saul's name will be changed to Paul and that is how we know him today. Paul becomes the most important writer and evangelist in the New Testament of the Bible.

Prior to our reading we are introduced to Saul or Paul as a persecutor of Christians. He must have been pretty ruthless by the way he is described. We are told that when Paul was young he was a leader in having Stephen beaten to death with rocks. He went about from town to town looking for followers of Jesus.

Paul would pull these followers of Jesus, men and women, out of their homes, torture them in front of their family members, and drag them off to prison. Saul or Paul was as bad as any ISIS leader. That is where we will pick up the story today.

In our reading we will not hear the name "Christian" used in describing the followers of Jesus. The name "Christian" will not be used until the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts and it is probably a name used to mock the Jesus followers. In our Scripture that we are reading we will hear the Jesus followers described as followers of the Way.

### **Read Acts 9:1-22**

Samuel Pierpont Langley is a name we should know. In the late 1800's Langley was given \$70,000, a huge sum of money, by the US Defense Department and private investors to develop the world's first flying machine. Langley was smart and well connected. He taught at Harvard and he worked at the Smithsonian.

Langley knew the smartest people around the US and he hired these people to work for him. The New York Times followed him around and recorded his efforts to build a flying machine. But, of course, we do not know the name of Samuel Pierpont Langley today.

We do know the names of Orville and Wilbur Wright. Orville and Wilbur had very little money. They did not have big financial backers from the government or private investors. Instead, Orville and Wilbur relied on the money they earned as bike mechanics in Dayton, OH.

Orville and Wilbur Wright had no college degrees. When they would go out and test their flying machine they would take 5 sets of parts with them because that is how often they would crash in their experiments. But Orville and Wilbur had a vision. They had a vision to create something that would change the world.

Samuel Pierpont Langley had a vision as well. He had a vision to make lots of money and become famous. The money and the investment and the attention went to Langley to be successful in building a flying machine. But Langley was not the one that was successful in building a flying machine. It is the unlikely ones that may be the ones with the visions to change the world for the better.

Today we have read a story of two people that are unlikely characters in this story of transformation. The first character is Saul. Two chapters later in Acts we read that Saul's name will be changed to Paul so I will refer to him here as Paul. Paul is how we know him today and Paul becomes the most important writer and evangelist in the New Testament of the Bible.

As I mentioned earlier, Paul was feared by Christians for his relentless persecution of Christian men and women. He tortured them and killed followers like Stephen. He was notorious for his ruthless behavior. But Paul was passionate in what he did because he thought that he was carrying out the will of God.

Being passionate for a religious cause does not mean that you are doing the will of God. Paul certainly thought that he was being faithful. But it is on this road to Damascus that Paul learns that his zealous persecution of Christians is not God's will.

While Paul is on his way to Damascus which is about 130 miles from Jerusalem in modern day Syria, Paul is stopped by a light. Paul falls to the ground and hears a voice ask him why he persecuting followers of Jesus. Paul asks for a name for the voice. Paul is told that the voice is from Jesus whom Paul is persecuting. Paul is told to continue on his journey and that when he arrives in the city he will be told what to do.

But there is a problem now for Paul. He is no longer able to see. The light has blinded him. The men with Paul heard the voice as well but they did not see anyone. So they come to Paul's aid and escort him on to Damascus. For three days Paul is without sight and he neither eats nor drinks.

When we hear this story told the focus is always on Paul as it should be. This event leads Paul to change his focus from being a persecutor of Jesus to becoming the greatest evangelist for Jesus. But today I want to invite us to spend some time with the other main character in this story. The character of Ananias. Because I think that Ananias has something to teach us here today about where we find the people that God is calling to do incredible things for God.

Ananias, we are told is minding his own business in Damascus. He was one of these followers of the Way. Ananias has a vision and in this vision when he hears his name called he answers with the words, "Here I Am, Lord." Ananias must have a pretty deep relationship with God to respond in this way.

Ananias is then told that he is to search and find Paul who has come to Damascus. But Ananias is well aware of Paul's history and reputation. Ananias wants no part of Paul. And that is what Ananias communicates to Jesus. "Jesus, haven't you heard? This person is evil and he has been sanctioned by the religious authorities to kill first and ask questions later.

But Jesus reassures Ananias that he does know about Paul. And it is Paul that he is calling to fulfill the ministry of Jesus.

So what does Ananias have to teach us today who have gathered here in worship? Let us imagine that Ananias represents those of us who find ourselves in church today. When you imagine the types of people that God calls to lead the church into the future what kinds of people do you have in mind? Who does God call to be the next generation of religious leaders? Who does God call to be the next generation of leaders in the church?

Do we imagine that the best religious leaders are the ones who are active in the church today? Do we imagine that the best church leaders are the ones with good leadership characteristics? Do we imagine that the best church leaders are a certain age? Do we imagine that that best church leaders are the ones with the most money? If we think that way then we may be overlooking the ones that God is calling.

If Ananias is our story then those of us here have a responsibility as followers of Jesus to bless the ones that God is calling to serve and lead. And the ones that God is calling to lead the church into the future may be the very people that may feel shunned by the church today.

There is no good reason to look to Paul to be an evangelist. No good reason. He was bad for business. But that is who God chose. The persecutor of Jesus followers becomes the greatest evangelist of God's message.

So now let's think about who is on the outside of the church today that God may be calling into service. Who is it that God is giving dreams to and shining bright lights on and calling to lead in God's church? As Ananias, who is that we are called to bless that is outside of the church because God is calling them to be church leaders?

We are surrounded lately by lots of rhetoric about who to keep out. Who to keep out of the country and who to keep out of certain bathrooms. But the message of the gospel seems to be a God who goes to great lengths to invite people in who have no business being invited in.

Yesterday a few of us were invited to meet with some other church representatives who have felt led to re-develop their property like we are doing with Common Ground. We heard about churches that were also building walking trails, prayer chapels, and common areas where all are invited to encounter God. I will say that the other churches were super jealous of the history of the two cemeteries that we have and the stories that we shared about them.

As we sat in this circle yesterday with about 20 or so people representing 5 congregations, it became clear to me that the people that God is calling to lead the church in the future may be outside of the church today. And that it is our responsibility as Ananias Christians to develop the space and openness to bless their own Damascus road experiences.

God may be revealing to you and me the names and faces of people that God wants us to bless for ministry in the church. Don't discount anyone. Be open to everyone that God may be calling.

The words and actions that you share with that person may be the blessing that they are yearning to receive. AMEN.

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-Info on Wright Brothers from Simon Sinek Ted Talk,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sioZd3AxmnE>

-Given: April 24, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)