

Reflection. Second Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Readings.
Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-8; St Matthew 9:35 -10:8

The Gospel reading for today is the story of Jesus sending out the 12, and contains the names of these men. I daresay that we could get a reflection, or indeed a sermon out of each of the people named, but rather than reflect on the disciples I want to reflect on another person who was called by Jesus – and called in a very dramatic way – Saul who became Paul.

The main road leading south out of Damascus is a dangerous thoroughfare these days. We know enough about the Syrian war to not want to be anywhere near that road. Well, it just so happens that the same road was dangerous in a different way a long time ago to the man we meet in the New Testament named Saul of Tarsus.

In one of the most well-known of biblical stories, Saul was stricken by a light from heaven while traveling on that road. The light knocked him to the ground and blinded him.

The background to Saul falling flat on his face is recorded in words from the ninth chapter of the Book of Acts: "Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if Saul were to find any individuals who belonged to the Way [that is, the Christian community of the day], whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem."

Saul was Enemy Number 1 of the church. People knew well of his violent and murderous tendencies. Male and female believers alike would be seized from their homes and synagogues without notice and hauled off to prison, or worse.

Saul was not without religious belief. He grew up in Jerusalem, a devout Jew. But Saul's version of Judaism made him full of hatred for the Christian community.

On that Damascus road, when the voice from heaven calls out Saul's name not once twice, we shouldn't be surprised. This is standard practice for God when God is seeking the attention of someone who may not be listening well: "Abraham, Abraham." Or "Jacob, Jacob." Or "Moses, Moses." Today it is Saul whom God is after. And what better way to grab a hate-mongering soul than to blindsides him with both light and truth in one wallop?

Saul, who later took the name we know best – PAUL - never got over that voice or that moment. He was so overwhelmed by a God who would be willing to do business with him, even in his bigotry, that his whole life changed in an instant. He was never the same after that.

And it is then that we meet Ananias. You can understand the reluctance of this man, who had heard of this man Saul. Hunted people do not usually minister to those who are hunting them. As R. Kent Hughes put it, that's like Peter Rabbit caring for Mr. McGregor. But the Lord tells Ananias that there is indeed a reason for his mission. "This Saul is to be a chosen instrument of mine," says the Lord, "who will bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. So go find him and minister to him."

Ananias went. He entered the Damascus house where friends had taken the now-blind Saul. And laying his hands on this man who could not see, Ananias said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me here so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

BROTHER SAUL, he said - surely two of the most wonderful words in the entire New Testament. This arch enemy of the Christian community had now become a brother to Ananias.

This sounds like a crazy story - one man accepting and overcoming the hatred of another who, in no way, resembled a chosen instrument of the Lord. Yet God has a way of finding faithful people who are willing to work with even the most unlovable people.

I did not know the story of Larry Trapp, until I came across it during the week. It is an amazing story, which I share with you now. Larry was one of the leaders of a racist organisation in America. In the late 1980s and early '90s, Larry Trapp took great joy in harassing Jewish people, immigrants, and people of colour. He made threatening phone calls, sent out hate mail, and encouraged his followers to commit acts of violence against non-white and Jewish people.

But Larry Trapp made a mistake when he picked on Michael and Julie Weissner in his home town of Lincoln, New England. Michael was the cantor of the local synagogue, and Trapp let loose on Michael with a string of nasty words over the phone. "You'll be sorry you ever moved into that house. We are watching you."

At first, the Weissner's installed a security system. Then, one day, they realized that fear and intimidation from these escalating threats were consuming them. So what do you do when a racist becomes hell bent on destroying you? Well, you could try the unconventional approach of loving that individual. This became Michael Weissner's aim.

He began calling Larry Trapp's house. Each time, he had to listen to a 10-minute recording on white supremacy before he could even leave a message. But Weissner kept leaving messages that were frank yet loving, telling Trapp in different ways that hatred is no way to live.

One time, Larry Trapp picked up the phone. That's when Weissner learned that Larry was disabled, a diabetic with both legs amputated. In a stunning offer of friendship, Michael Weissner offered to take Larry Trapp to the supermarket for groceries. Eventually - and it took a while - Michael and Julie were permitted to pay a visit to Larry Trapp's house. They found him in this unkempt house stuffed with racist literature. Here was a bully in a wheelchair, with a sawn-off shotgun by his side.

When the couple first met Larry, Michael shook his hand and all three of them started to cry. They talked for a couple of hours. Larry asked them to take down his Nazi flag. The Weissner's paid regular visits after that, delivering groceries and assisting with house cleaning.

When doctors informed Larry that he had no more than perhaps another year to live, medically speaking, the Weissner's took Larry Trapp into their own home. Julie gave up her job as a doctor's assistant to care for him. Larry ended up converting to Judaism. He renounced the horrors of racism. And consider this: He made a point of phoning every person he had ever harassed and apologized to them.

Ten months after moving in with the Weissner's, Larry Trapp died. Some of the African-American victims of his hatred spoke fondly of him at his memorial service. Michael Weissner delivered the eulogy for this bigot-turned-family-member. And in that eulogy, Michael referred to him as "BROTHER LARRY" - two of the most wonderful words Lincoln, New England, had ever heard.

Ananias of Damascus, who was willing to take seriously the no-matter-whatness of God, laid his hands on Saul of Tarsus one day and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

BROTHER SAUL. Those are two of the greatest words ever recorded in the New Testament. Not only do those two words remind us of God's tendency to use unlikely people to be instruments of grace. Those words, or any variation of them that you and I are courageous enough to speak in our circles of life, those two words make crystal clear that love is the last thing our enemies might **expect** to hear from us, but the first thing they **need** to hear.