

**April 17, 2016**

**TEXT: Acts 9:1–19**

**TITLE: Complex Persecution**

No, the sermon title is not a typo. Yes, the more common phrase is “persecution complex.” We routinely hear about people who believe they are being unfairly persecuted—that somehow they can’t celebrate Christmas if someone says “Happy Holidays” to them when they buy a cup of coffee; that somehow our textbooks are biased if publishers admit the Civil War was fought over slavery; that somehow one’s presidential hopes are being squelched by the media when it dares to ask hard questions about what a person actually believes in or how he or she would handle real challenges in the real world. Listen: Just because you don’t always get your way doesn’t mean you’re persecuted; sometimes we’re wrong and we shouldn’t get what we want. No matter how rich you are, you can’t have all the toys all the time. In those rare moments when privilege is challenged by equality, privilege can’t whine about being persecuted simply because justice is now part of the equation.

No, we’re not going to talk about persecution complexes. We’re going to talk about how complex persecution is. Hatred is not complex. Lashing out and doing injury to someone is not complex. It is wrong and usually indefensible, but it is not complex. Persecution, though, requires more careful thought. It requires malicious intent, a will to harm someone that is planned out, and acted upon over a period of time. Persecution is oppression, maltreatment, harassment and abuse, while the opposite of persecution is to comfort, commend, welcome and make happy. It is easy to see when someone is not being persecuted. I read how Ben Franklin generously made a contribution to every house of worship being built in Philadelphia, including five pounds given for the new synagogue in town. So at the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade in 1788, when Franklin was too sick to come outside and see the festivities, arrangements were made for the parade to march past his window with all the clergy and the Jewish rabbi walking by arm in arm.<sup>1</sup> Hospitality, respect, mutual support—that is easy to recognize; but persecution is something trickier, more insidious and complex.

Early in the book of Acts, the apostle Peter was preaching in Jerusalem when he was arrested and the people wanted to kill him. Then a wise rabbi named Gamaliel said, “Wait. If what he is preaching is not from God, then it cannot last.” What is different in Acts 9 is that Saul is saying, “Don’t wait. If what those Christians believe is not like us, it must not last.” Persecution is the intent to harm, silence, and abuse others simply because of who they are or what they believe. It’s a complex, tangled thing.

Saul was headed north out of Jerusalem, on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians, when something dramatic happened that totally changed him, literally for good. Typically we picture this event in Saul’s life as something big and dramatic—a loud voice booming from the heavens, “Why do you persecute me?”

That is why I love how the choir anthem depicts that precise moment. When Jesus first speaks to Saul, his name is spoken like a low whisper that cannot be ignored. The words are repeated again and again: Saul, Saul, Saul, why? Why? Finally the whole question comes together: Saul, why do you persecute me? The bright light stopped Saul in his tracks, but in the end, he was changed because of the power of a few words: “Saul, why do you persecute me?”

This is easily the most famous story in the book of Acts. We refer to it as the conversion of Saul—when Saul the Pharisee encounters Christ and is transformed into Paul, the bold apostle of the Christian faith. Saul’s conversion is dramatic and has been held up by some as the model for how all of us should come to faith in Jesus. Pentecostal preachers and pulpiteers exhort people to fall to their knees and be struck down by the Holy Spirit, so that when they rise again they may be new creations altogether. But the reason Saul’s conversion is remembered is because it was exceptional, not because it was the rule. And when I think of this event, my preference is that we don’t think of it as a Hollywood event with surround-sound special effects. This was not Jacob Marley, the Ghost of Christmas Past, bellowing at a cowering Ebenezer when Scrooge suggested his visitor was caused by a bit of undigested beef. Because since when has Jesus ever shouted someone into faith? Since when has the Lamb of God won converts by bluster and bellowing? Jesus consistently spoke words of welcome and healing mercy. To Zacchaeus in the tree, Jesus said, “*Come down for today I will dine at your house.*” (Lk 19:5) To the woman about to be wrongly stoned, he said, “*Woman, where are those who would condemn you? None? Then neither do I condemn you. Go your way and sin no more.*” (Jn 8:11)

You can’t be scared into holiness or intimidated into faithfulness. But you can have your world turned upside down by a few words spoken by a still, small voice, such as when Saul heard Jesus say, “Why do you persecute me?” For years, Saul was sure he was right. He had a brilliant mind and his life was dedicated to following the letter of the law as he’d been taught it. When the followers of Christ emerged and began to talk about how God’s Messiah had been raised from the dead, Saul became furious because that wasn’t how the story was supposed to be told. So he thought and he plotted. His logic and passion combined to form a plan: Christians must be stopped, which means they must be arrested, which means he has to go where they are gathering and find them, which means he should first get permission from the religious leaders to act on their behalf even when he was far from the temple in Jerusalem. Saul did all that. His script of misguided piety became a plan for complex persecution.

Now before I mention how Christ re-wrote Saul’s script, I need us to think about the religious scripts we follow; because every one of us has a script. What is your script about faith? For some people their script says the church is a nice safe thing, one option during a week full of other equally important options involving both work and play. Some have a script that says church is a social time for seeing friends while being gently reminded to do good for others when we can.

Some stand on the front porch of the church and look out at the world believing every day should be one in which we have no aches or pain, discomfort or inconvenience, and God exists to make sure that comes true for us. Some stand in the shadows of the church and wonder why this institution is too often silent about our human sins of prejudice and abuse, racism, homophobia, and inhumanity toward others. Some scripts talk a bit about God, but ultimately trust technology to solve all our problems and clean up our messes; or more seriously, some trust ultimately in militarism that will protect our property and make us great again at the expense of anyone we determine is not “us.”

Scripts, when followed too rigidly and uncritically, become scripts for persecution—complex, convoluted rationales for doing what we want to whomever we want, because we’re right and they’re wrong. Build a wall. Lock ‘em up. Hit the road for Damascus with arrest warrants clutched in your hand. All of us have a script. All of us. And I’m convinced there is only one corrective strong enough to flip our scripts, to get us to see differently and live faithfully. It’s so simple, we will wonder, “Why have I been so blind and not seen this all along?”

Jesus said to Saul, “Why do you persecute me?” Saul thought he was going after some misguided Jews, some deluded followers of a dangerous sect. But if God was incarnate in this Jesus and this Jesus had been raised from the dead, and he was with these Christian believers – literally there, in their lives, in their worship, in their spirit, in their faith—then Saul was persecuting the very Lord he believed he was serving. He couldn’t see that before, or even imagine it. But when he heard Jesus’ voice, and felt the compassionate touch of Ananias, scales fell from his eyes and Saul saw as he’d never seen before.

Easter teaches us that Christ is alive. Acts and the rest of the bible teach us that Christ is present in the face, voice and touch of whoever is right before us. In the Journey worship service two weeks ago I mentioned how Mother Teresa used to emphasize a “five finger gospel.” She would remind people about the parable in which Jesus commended those who gave him water when he was thirsty, food when he was hungry, a welcome when he was a stranger, clothing when he was naked, and a visit when he was sick or in prison. The people asked when did they ever see Christ naked, hungry, thirsty, alone, sick or in prison, and Jesus’ reply became Mother Teresa’s five finger gospel: When you did this to one of the least of these, you-did-it-to-me.

That script is meant to be taken literally. It’s not a metaphor, an allegory, a motto, mantra or bumper sticker. You-did-it-to-me. What you say to the Trump or Cruz supporter, or to the Bernie or Hillary supporter, it is as if you-say-it-to-Christ. What you did for that person on the street, that stranger of a different race or zip code, that person seeking a safe place to live out their gender identity, you-did-it-to-Christ. But also when we persecute by paying other countries to hold back the refugees, whether it’s the U.S. paying Mexico or Europe paying Turkey, we do it

to Christ. When we lock away men and break up families in a broken criminal justice system, or when we refuse to fund schools and health care the way we fund Congress and our sports franchises, we do so to Christ.

The complexity of persecution cannot be wished away by ignoring it. It cannot be criticized away with self-righteous words on social media. It cannot be stopped until the script is flipped—and in place of fanaticism is simply a face. The face of Christ. The one saying “Why do you persecute me?” The one turning Saul into Paul. The one saying “You are an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and all the people.” That is the script Saul learned on the road to Damascus and that is the script we need to learn about ourselves and those around us. A script that commands us to tell the truth about the great issues of our day. A script that shares the amazing gospel of a living Christ.<sup>2</sup> A script that subverts and astonishes and amazes us daily, for such is the face of Christ right before our eyes, if we look with eyes of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin: An American Life, 2003, p. 468.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Walter Brueggemann, Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church, 2007, p. 204.