

Easter 3C. John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-20. May 5, 2019.

It doesn't happen very often that the call of the gospel aligns so perfectly with the siren song of one of its main rivals in our context—I mean, of course, that dastardly institution, enemy of preachers everywhere: early Sunday brunch. In today's gospel reading, the risen Jesus cooks his friends breakfast on the beach. Over a Eucharistic meal of bread and miraculous fish, he calls his friends out of and deeper into the mundane daily life to which they had returned. After stumbling out of Jerusalem and back up to Galilee, they're fishing again, as they were when he first called them. Notice that they are not required to give up fishing, but in whatever they do, to feed and tend those who Jesus regards as his own. It is a model of baptismal ministry to which we are all called.

I would like to continue my ode to brunch, and locate every brunch within the context of this story, making them all mini-eucharists. But I suspect that as beautiful, rich, and gentle as this story is, the story we most need to hear this morning is rather the calling of Saul to be Paul—and even more, of Ananias to be the instrument of that conversion.

To remind you, in Acts we're tracing the first months of the church after Jesus' resurrection. It is still largely a contested branch of Judaism. The preferred method of evangelism in the earliest church is to go to the synagogue and take a turn talking, as any male member of the assembly could do. (Note: this practice is no longer recommended.) It was not yet the case, as it is now, that to accept Jesus as the Messiah is to stop being a Jew. These first Christians are successful enough that they become controversial, and a more orthodox young Pharisee named Saul takes the lead in the diffuse effort to cut this branch off of the tree of Judaism. Today's Acts reading tells how Saul became Paul and began to lead the work of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. And it happens through a poor disciple named Ananias.

To get how this might matter to us today, we have to think outside of our assumptions. Episcopalians are a people loath to admit having enemies. We tend to take religious differences as roughly analogous to the choice between Coke and Pepsi. We may know for certain the Episcopalian Coke is better than Methodist Pepsi, but we don't actually think that the differences matter very much. We have a strong consumerist preference, but we act as if any difference in religious belief amounts only to consumerist preference.

Understand, I am not saying that everyone besides us is wrong. I'm not saying that at all—but I am trying to get us to imagine a vicious enemy who wants to arrest or kill us because of what we believe and how we live. I want us to imagine religious difference as something that can lead to oppression. We have neighbors who don't have to imagine it. Perhaps we don't have to imagine it if we think in terms of who we are, what we believe, and how we live. Saul is not just a Pepsi drinker. He is arresting followers of the Way and overseeing mob lynchings of Christians. He is the kind of enemy many of us do not have, but that the church should be earning. He is the kind of enemy many of us expect, even if the cause of their hatred isn't our religion.

And Ananias, just a normal Christian going about his business, gets this inconceivable mission from God: to heal and then to teach the most dangerous enemy the church has. What do we do with the enemies Jesus assumed we would have and called us to love? What does love in danger look like? First, I want us to notice that God does most

of the work in converting Saul. Jesus appears in a vision to him, the Lord shows Saul how much he will suffer, the Lord sends him out to tell the good news to the Gentiles. When our goal with our enemies is to convert them to the love of God, rather than to beat them, we can trust in God to do most of the work. In other words, when our work is God's work, we don't have to do nearly as much.

Second, Ananias is not naïve. He hadn't just walked up to Saul with arms extended to be bound. He goes when he is sent, and double-checks with God even then. When he arrives, there is no false bonhomie. He doesn't address Saul as pal or buddy. He speaks only the more robust bedrock theological truth: Brother Saul. Ananias sees through even Saul's wickedness to the underlying truth that God is calling them into relationship, that they together are children of God. Saul is not a friend, but he is a brother. And this distinction helps keep Ananias' purpose clear. His point in coming to Saul is nothing short of transformation. He isn't seeking a share in Saul's dirty power; he isn't just there to tell him that he is wrong and luxuriate in righteous indignation; he is there to offer Saul the chance to be transformed. Loving the enemy, the enemy oppressor, has very little to do with being polite. If we show up for it at all, we must be showing up for the whole thing—a call to repentance and an invitation into God's love.

I think these days we're beginning to think more about enemies than we perhaps have for some time. And I mean enemies here, across the dinner table, in our government, among our religious cousins. For Episcopalians, this is very uncomfortable, but for Christians it shouldn't be a surprise. Jesus wouldn't have told us to love our enemies if he didn't expect us to have any. And we need a roadmap for how to do it. Ananias gives us that map. We love our enemies by letting God do the hardest part of the work. We love them without naivety, without aiding what may be wickedness, and without confusing love with politeness. We love them by remaining rigorously focused on the love of God. It takes courage and trust and humility and a memory of how we have ourselves been forgiven. And it just may play a role in God's redemption of the world. Amen.