

June 22, 2014

Church Planting  
Throw It Away!  
Acts 9:1-9

**Opening words:** A.W. Tozer once wrote, "*I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn't find it out for many months.*" That quote makes me ask you this question. How long do you think it would take for us to discover the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Western Reserve? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be an instant discovery? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be a slow erosion? How many would never notice the Holy Spirit was gone? Do you think the Holy Spirit left Western Reserve years ago?

Last summer, I began a project that will take four summers to complete, preaching through the Book of Acts. I have called this entire body of work *Church Planting*. Last summer I preached through the first eight chapters. The main characters in those stories were the original twelve disciples. The next two summers, we will be looking at Paul's three missionary journeys. This summer we will be examining chapters nine through eleven. These chapters are significant because Paul takes center stage.

Our reading for this morning is one of the familiar stories in the New Testament, Saul's conversion. I find this story to be amazing. Just think about it. Paul walked away from his old life and became a new person. That is hard to do. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 9:1-9. Let me call this message *Throw It Away!*

---

**Acts 9:1-9** <sup>1</sup>Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup>"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. <sup>6</sup>"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." <sup>7</sup>The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup>For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

---

They tell me Italy has a unique New Year's Eve tradition. It is not unique because of the menu or beverages. What makes it unique is the practice that takes place at the magic moment. After all, New Year's Eve is a bridge between the past and the future. As the magic hour begins to draw near, the streets grow empty and quiet.

However, as the clock strikes twelve, the solitude is broken by the sound of windows opening. What flies out of those windows is quite a collection of things. There is worn out furniture and chipped dishes. There are clothes that have gone out of style and clothes that have grown too small. There are pictures of past boyfriends and girlfriends. There are personal items which remind individuals of some difficult experiences during the past year. It all goes out the window for one reason. They want to start the New Year without any imperfections. Can I ask you a question? What would you like to throw out? What is holding you back from a better tomorrow?

I spent part of this past week at Annual Conference. As usual, it was held at Lakeside on the Marblehead peninsula. It was my twenty-ninth Annual Conference. Every year, it is the same, but it is different. Every year, they read the names of the pastors who have died during the past twelve months. I knew some of those people. They were at the peak of their careers when I was just beginning. In their last photos, they looked like of shadow of their former selves. Every year, they recognize this year's retirement class. One of my closest friends, Byron, retired this year. This is his last Sunday in the pulpit. He swears he will never return. Every year, the new class of ordinates is welcomed. I am glad I'm not starting again. Every year, I see the same faces looking older and larger. Can I be honest with you? One of the things I hate about Annual Conference is looking back. One of the things I don't do well is look back. Yes, the past is filled with some wonderful things, but the past is also filled with some horrible things. What would you like to throw away from your past? If that make you think, say, **"Amen!"**

It must have been hard for Saul to look back. After all, there were so many things in his past that he regretted. We were introduced to Saul last summer. Do you remember the story? He was present when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death. (Acts 7:54-8:1) Some believe Saul was the leader of that lynch mob. Regardless, it is safe to say the stoning of Stephen changed everything in the early church. It sent a shock wave through the early church, forcing the believers to scatter for their own protection. Stephen's death not only changed the early church, but changed Saul. He never forgot how Stephen died, as a man full of faith. You have to remember that story if you are going completely understand this week's passage.

We are in the ninth chapter of Acts. The persecution of the church continues. However, this time the focal point is not Jerusalem, it is Damascus. That point is important because it was in the Roman province of Syria. Like Jerusalem, it also boasted a large Jewish population. Saul has been given authority to look for Christians in that community. If found, they will be arrested and taken back to Jerusalem, where they will be imprisoned. The distance between Jerusalem and Damascus was 150 miles. On foot, it would take Saul about a week to travel. That journey was made alone because he had limited contact with his guard. With every step, Saul was thinking. He wasn't just thinking about his future task, he was thinking about his past regrets.

I wonder how much time he spent thinking about the death of Stephen. Perhaps, all that thinking set the stage for what happened next?

Without warning, as Saul approached Damascus, the unexpected happened. A bright light from heaven is focused on him. Instinctively, he falls to the ground and hears a voice. In the next few moments, two questions are asked. The first is asked by Jesus himself. He asks, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" When you persecute or criticize the church, you are persecuting or criticizing Jesus. The church is the bride of Christ. The second question comes from Saul, "*Who are you, Lord?*" It was a question that was asked to fill the silence. He knew the answer. The man who was used to telling people what to do is suddenly told what to do. He is to go into Damascus and wait. He waited in complete darkness because his eyesight was taken away. He was in that state for three days, without food. Just like Jesus was dead for three days. So why is Saul's conversion story important to us today? This is the answer.

When Saul was converted, he left everything behind. That sounds easy in theory, but it is hard to do in reality. Just think for a moment about everything he left behind. He left behind his family. In his former state, his parents must have been proud of him, but now he is suddenly unwelcome. In his former state, his teachers must have been proud of him; he was a genius! Now, he was the class dunce. In his former state, his nation was proud of him, but now he was considered a traitor. His Who's Who membership was evoked. The old Saul was suddenly gone and the new Saul was facing an uncertain future. When Saul was converted, he left everything behind.

I do not know your conversion story. Everybody's story is different. Maybe your story includes wild parties and fast women? Maybe your story includes a church camp in the woods? Maybe your story includes a family member who wanted just wanted to see you in heaven? Maybe your story includes a mission trip or an altar call. Maybe your story includes a Sunday school teacher who took time just for you. All of our stories are different, but all of our stories are the same. On the day we came to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior, everything changed. Like Saul, you should have become a new person. Unlike Saul, what old habits are you carrying from your old life?

Today, let me talk about two things in your life that need to be thrown away. Both are church cripplers. Saul got rid of both of them once he was converted. We hold onto them. What are the two? The first is your negativity. Do the people in your life consider you a negative person? Do you have the power to ruin any happy situation? The second is frugality. Do the people in your life consider you cheap? Are you only happy when you are spending money on yourself? If you would apply these two things to your life, then we would have a better church. If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

### **Negativity**

Several weeks ago, I was out visiting. It was a beautiful day, warm and sunny. I was in a good mood and hated to go inside.

When I got to the information desk, I was directed to a room on the second floor. When I got to the room, I found the door closed. I went to the end of the hall and waited for the door to open. I selected a seat near the window so I could look out. Outside the window was a garden filled with colorful flowers, which made the day even more perfect. As I sat there, I couldn't help but overhear the conversation going on in a nearby room, where the door was open. The resident said to her guest, "It is a beautiful day." The guest responded, "It is about time. It is already June and I just turned my heat off. It will be cold again in a couple of days." The resident said, "I sure am glad to see you." The guest responded, "I almost didn't come because I have a sore throat. If you get my sore throat, it could kill you." The resident asked, "Well, do you have any plans this summer?" The guest responded, "Do I look like a millionaire? No! Have you seen the price of gas? I live on a fixed income." (Don't we all live on a fixed income?) The resident said, "Have you watched any interesting television programs?" The guest answered, "I only watch the news. Did you hear Rio won't be ready for the next Olympics?" After a few minutes of overhearing this discussion, I got out of my seat and limped away. I couldn't get away fast enough because I couldn't stand the negativity. Do the people in your life consider you a negative person? Have you ever ruined a nice day with your rotten attitude?

Do you know any negative people in your church? Do you know anyone in church who thinks that everything is wrong? There is never enough money to do anything for anyone else. The temperature is too hot or too cold. The music is always too loud or slow. The children are too active and the floors are too slick. The minister is too handsome and the sermons are too interesting. Can I be honest with you? If you can't say anything positive, then stay home. Your negativity is crippling this church. The church should be filled with optimistic people. After all, you believe in a man who defeated the ultimate negative, death! In time, Saul became the eternal optimist. Paul believed he could win the whole world for Jesus Christ. If you want to be an asset to this church, then throw out your negativity. If you can remember that, say, "**Amen!**" Throw away your negativity and throw away your narrow-mindedness.

### **Frugality**

The other day, I was at Annual Conference. I was sitting in the section reserved for the Mahoning Valley District. I was fixated on every word of every report. The hours felt more like days. The announcements are the best part of every session because they come near the end. All kind of things are announced. The Duke Divinity School is having a reunion. The lay speakers are gathering for lunch. The youth are going put-putting at 7:00. On Tuesday, they announced to the conference to tip generously if you are eating in a local restaurant. That announcement caught me off guard. I wondered, why you would have to announce to tip generously. There is only one answer. Many don't tip generously. In other words, some who go to conference are cheap.

When I got back to the cottage, we began to talk about that announcement. One guy said he used to work in the food industry. He said everyone who works in the food industry wants to work on Friday and Saturday nights. Why? Drinkers are generous, so the tips are big. No one wants to work on Sunday at noon. Why? Church-goers are notoriously cheap. Many church-goers don't leave a cent. In other words, the food industry has discovered what ministers have known for years. Church-goers are cheap. Wrestle with these statistics. They come from a book called *Money and the Bible*.

**The Biblical standard for giving is the tithe, 10%**

**96% of American church goers don't tithe**

**The average American church goer only gives 2.6%**

**The average American church goer gives \$17 a week or \$840 annually**

**The average American Christian gives 30% less than the average Church-goer did during the Great Depression in 1933!**

The figures don't lie. How we spend our money says a great deal about our spiritual health. Most churches struggle financially, not from excess spending. The problem is a lack of giving. Generally speaking, 20% of the people give 80% of the money. Does anyone see anything wrong with those figures? If you are in that 80% who gives 20% of the money, then your frugality is crippling this church. Saul was not frugal. Paul gave it all. Many believe he gave his life. If you want to be an asset to this church, then throw your frugality away. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Don't tell me God doesn't have a sense of humor. He took the greatest threat to the early church and transformed him into the greatest evangelist the church has ever known. He walked away from everything in his past and became something new. How old do you look?

Will you pray with me?