

July 13, 2014
Church Planting

Discipleship 101
Acts 9:19b-31

Opening words: Three weeks ago, I returned to my project of preaching through the Book of Acts. I have called this entire body of work *Church Planting*. It will take me four summers to complete. Last summer, I preached through the first eight chapters. Those chapters focused on the original disciples. The next two summers, we will be looking at Paul's missionary journeys in chapters twelve through twenty-eight. That means, this summer, we are going to be looking at chapters nine through eleven. During these chapters Saul, later Paul, takes center stage. Today's story is no exception.

Do you remember Saul's story to this point? We were introduced to him in the seventh chapter of Acts. It was the day that Stephen was martyred. That was a dark day in the history of the church. Jerusalem was no longer a safe place for the church. The believers began to scatter for their own protection. The head of Stephen's lynch mob was Saul. The next time we hear about Saul was in the first verse of the ninth chapter. The persecution was spreading. Saul had been given authority to arrest any of the believers in Damascus. However, during that 140-mile journey between Jerusalem and Damascus, the unexpected happened. He is confronted by Jesus and is held accountable for his acts. Blind, hungry and thirsty, he is taken in to the city. As Saul waits, Jesus is enlisting a man by the name of Ananias. He offers Saul something that he didn't deserve, grace! Saul, the most feared man in the early church, was baptized into the fellowship. That leads us to today's lesson, Acts 9:19b-31. Let me call this message *Discipleship 101*.

Acts 9:19b-31 Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

²³ After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

²⁹ He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. ³⁰ When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Once upon a time, there was a fire in a small town. The fire brigade rushed to the scene, but the firemen were unable to get through to the burning building. The problem was the crowd of people who had gathered to help put out the fire. They all knew and liked the fire chief. So when a fire broke out, the people rushed out to help their beloved fire chief. Unfortunately, the townsfolk were seeking to extinguish this raging inferno with water pistols! They'd all stand there, from time to time squirting their pistol into the fire while making casual conversation. The fire chief couldn't contain himself. He started screaming at the townsfolk. "What do you think you're doing? What on earth do you think you're going to achieve with those water pistols?!" The people realized the urgency of the situation. How they wanted to help the fire chief! So they started squirting more. "Come on", they encouraged each other, "We can all do better, can't we?" They squirted a few more drops. Exasperated, the fire chief yells again. "Get out of here. You're achieving nothing except hindering us from doing what needs to be done. We need fire fighters who are ready to give everything they've got to put out this fire, people willing even to lay their lives on the line. This is not the place for token contributions!"

That story was originally told by Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. He told that story for one reason. Discipleship is more than token contributions to the church and a few good deeds. Discipleship requires wholehearted and total life commitment. In other words, it is time to put your water pistol down and get serious about Jesus. If that story makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

When we last left Saul, his conversion was complete. He was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. Those must have been curious days in his life. This should have been a happy time, but the joy was stunted by loneliness. Just think about it for a moment. He walked away from his old life and his old relationships. His former colleagues must have viewed him as a traitor. His parents now considered him a disappointment. Former friends tried to figure out what went wrong. What really happened to Saul? There must have been rumors of mental illness and emotional breakdown. There would be no going back but going forward was equally difficult. To say the least, Saul came with some baggage. He was not welcomed by everyone in the church because he wasn't trusted by everyone. Yet, the scriptures do not say a single word about his loneliness. Instead, the scriptures tell us of his commitment. Verse 20 says, *"At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God."* I find that fact to be truly amazing. Instantly, his entire world changed, but the only thing that mattered to him was Jesus.

Being passionate about Jesus is the most important thing in discipleship. It is Discipleship 101. The only thing that really matters is Jesus. I think that will preach!

Every week before I preach I say the same prayer. You know the prayer.

Father, we have three great confessions. We confess we have all made mistakes and need forgiveness. We confess that negative news and people have worn us down and we need hope. We confess that our own mortality bothers us because we want to live forever. When we have Jesus, we have the answer to these three problems...

It is true. When we have Jesus, we have forgiveness. When we have Jesus, we have hope for a better world. When we have Jesus, we have eternal life. In others words, Jesus is affecting the way we remember the past, experience the present and anticipate the future. I do not know how people can't live without Jesus. I need Jesus more every day. If you need Jesus more now than ever, say, **"Amen!"**

Discipleship 101 tells us it is all about Jesus. The Master has to be number one. However, one of the great challenges in your life is keeping Jesus number one. It is so easy to let Jesus become a secondary priority. I am not talking about intentionally substituting Jesus with something sinister, drugs or crime. I am talking about substituting Jesus, the best, with something that is only good. How many times have we substituted Jesus, the best, with something that is only good? Our lives are filled with so many good things. It would be easy to make any of them our top priority. Let me give you just a few examples.

Your Country

In the fifteenth century, Ivan the Great did something no one was able to do in the past, defeat the Tartars and unite Russia. He had a brilliant military career, but his personal life was lacking. He was so consumed with military conquests that he never had time to marry and produce a single heir to the throne. Recognizing his deficiency, he told his adviser to find him a suitable wife. After a careful search, it was announced that Ivan would marry the daughter of the King of Greece. There was only one thing Ivan had to do, become Greek Orthodox. Ivan consented. He was instructed in Greek Orthodox doctrine and traveled to Athens, along with his 500-member palace guard. As a sign of loyalty, the guard requested to be baptized at the same time as Ivan. To make a long story short, they were baptized together in the Mediterranean. It must have been quite the scene. In front of a huge crowd, Ivan, his 500 guards and the 500 Orthodox priests entered the water. Soldiers wearing full military uniforms and priests wearing black robes. All the Russians were baptized in a single moment. However, the guards got the last laugh. When they were baptized, they held their swords out of the water as a sign of loyalty to Ivan. That story reminds us that religion and politics shouldn't mix. Either you are completely baptized or you are not baptized at all.

One of things I struggle with is civil religion. That is when we mix our religious beliefs with our patriotism. That drives me crazy because it is so dangerous. The news is filled with religious zealots who are fighting for both God and country. It is so easy to wave religion as a flag during a military conflict. The problem is real religion, any religion, doesn't condone such behavior. World history has seen the rise and fall of many nations. Your belief are the same as mine. We live in the most wonderful country in the history of the world but it has some limitations. America can still offer hope to future generations but America can't forgive your sins. America can't promise you eternal life. Jesus can do all three. That is why Jesus must be the top priority in your life. It is Discipleship 101. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Your Church

On July 1, I began my twenty-first year of service at Western Reserve. I am proud of that fact. Over that period, we have seen so many changes. Generally speaking, they have been good years for this congregation. They have not been as good for many of our United Methodist congregations in the area. The church that may have been hit the hardest is Mahoning UMC. We talked about her last week. Recently, they sold their building for \$305,000. (That would be good news if we were in the real estate business but we are not.) The few members who remain are facing a questionable future. My heart goes out to anyone who has ties back to Mahoning. Churches should never close. I know it is not just a building but so many things have happened with that structure. That building was such a large part of so many lives. How many people have been married there? How many babies have been baptized there? How many saints have been buried from there? How many souls were saved there? How many memories have been made there? Walking away from a church building is like walking away from an old friend. How can you do it? There is so much there? However, this is the truth.

The church is not Jesus. The church, itself, can't forgive you. The church, itself, can't offer you hope. The church, itself, can't make eternity possible. The church is just a vehicle used by Christ to offer those things to their community. The church is nothing more than another organization. Like people, churches have a lifeline. At some point every church was born and at some point every church will close. In time, it will happen here too. That is why you can't make your church your top priority. That is why the top priority in your life must be Jesus. It is Discipleship 101. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Saul knew from the very beginning what we must never forget. It is all about Jesus! Everything else, no matter how good, is secondary.

Several years ago, I was on a volunteer in mission trip in Russia. We were in the orphanage playing with the children. We were working on crafts and giving them candy. The children couldn't have been any more excited. A young couple on our team decided to give the children something they had brought. It wasn't more candy. It was something called "Jesus Blocks." It contained six blocks, each one a section of a picture of Jesus. If you laid the blocks just right a single image of Jesus came up. If you turned it one way, it was a picture of Jesus' birth.

If you turned it another way, it was a picture of Jesus on the cross. If you turned it another way, it was a picture of the resurrection. I will never forget the effect those blocks had on the children. I didn't think they would be interested, but those blocks grabbed their attention. One young man grabbed his blocks and studied the details of every picture. He took his finger tips and felt the smooth surface. At one point, he kissed his "Jesus Blocks" and held them up to his cheek. After doing so, he looked up at me and said in perfect English, "It is Jesus!" He was right! It is Discipleship 101! You have to be passionate about Jesus!

If we don't have Jesus, then we have nothing at all. Without Jesus, we don't have forgiveness. Without Jesus, we don't have hope for a better tomorrow. Without Jesus, we have no hope of eternity. With Jesus, we can have it all! Jesus must be the top priority in your life. It is Discipleship 101! Mother Teresa once said, *"Many people mistake our work for our vocation. Our vocation is the love of Jesus."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**