

Acts 9:1-20 9Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul 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." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

John 21:1-19 21After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. ⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a

charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

The two stories we've read today, one from the Book of Acts and the second from the gospel of John are both such great stories; full of colorful imagery; intended to surprise; both teaching us more about the ways that Jesus comes to us in life. I would imagine that the Disciples were skeptical about Jesus' death and the promise of resurrection. They might even have been rationalizing seeing him in the Upper Room. "Oh, we're all upset that he's gone. It's mass-hysteria." "We didn't really see him. We couldn't have." But, now, here are some of the Disciples again but this time by the Sea of Tiberias. They caught nothing that night and returned to shore feeling frustrated and forlorn. The man on the beach told them to try again. And they listened to him. He seemed assertive and like he knew something they did not. So they cast their nets again just as he'd instructed them, on the other side of the boat and this time they filled so full that they could barely drag them ashore and yet the nets remained in tact. Perhaps it was his voice that they recognized; or just the pure magic of his presence but they realized, "It is the Lord!" and they went to him; a fire already burning on the shore. He made them a meal because eating together is always communion and it is a wonderful way to draw closer to other people. The imagery is all so beautiful and vivid. Perhaps this is the moment when they were all turned around to understanding that Jesus truly was still with them.

The Acts story reminds us of Saul, that terrible person who seemed to get so much pleasure out of persecuting Christians. Walking along the road to Damascus to try to find

more of them to collect and imprison, Saul who thought he was doing good by the leaders of the temple and the Roman Empire was passionate about rounding up Christians. The Disciples had by now gotten used to hiding out at times or to being brave in the face of discrimination against them. But here, on this Damascus Road in a flash, Jesus spoke to Saul asking simply, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" It's written in the text that Saul was struck blind. Here was Jesus the Christ who came to him and in a second turned him around. Saul did what he was told, continued on to Damascus where Ananais would coe to him to the house of Judas on a street called Straight, and there Ananais would open Saul's eyes, rename him Paul, the Disciple to the Gentiles; the disciple who would travel far and wide to spread Jesus' message.

Paul was turned around and in his turning he came out right. No longer did he persecute Christians but having experienced Jesus Christ in a way most of us never have and perhaps never will, he became an advocate for Christ, for the teachings of Christ; and the Way of Jesus Christ.

Turn around. We talk about turn-around corporations and turn around small businesses. We hear about turn-around schools and hospitals. And these days we even hear about turn around churches. It seems in many cases that when a church decides to do things in very different ways it can make a big difference.

One of my colleagues in Ohio was hired by a church of about 20 regular attendees. They decided when they did their pastoral search that they would look for a "turn-around pastor"- someone who would come in and shake things up and maybe even make some

(gulp) changes. When they interviewed him he asked the search committee if they were really prepared for what it might mean to the church. He wanted to do some very different things, with the help of the Holy Spirit (because you certainly always increase your chances of success when God and lots of prayer are in the mix). They said they understood. They were ready. He went into the church as their new pastor and very aggressively made changes. By the end of his first year half the existing congregation had left. But there were 70 new members. Probably, the ten original members were all on the search committee and they knew that they wanted to turn the church around. The remaining 10 were perfectly happy with few participants, few members. Sometimes, we have to be very careful what we ask for, or we need to be excellent communicators about what it is that we want.

If we come to church on Sunday and rest on our laurels thinking our time and talents aren't needed then we need to be turned-around. We need to turn toward Christ, to ask what it is we are to do in the church and outside of the church, not as much for one another because that is an important given; but for those outside our doors who perhaps have never stepped through the doors and quite possibly never will.

THIS is a wonderful church and when we place Christ at the center of every single thing that we do, when we remember that in everything we do we are serving Christ and we are helping others come to know Christ, we too will turn around. Everything will come out fine; even better than what we experience here on a daily basis- and that is some really good stuff.

Both of our stories today are about people who make a complete turn around and come out right. Peter, we remember, denied Jesus three times when Jesus was captured and being tortured before Easter. And after Jesus returned he gave Peter a second chance when he said to him three times, "Feed my sheep". Paul's story is even more obvious. He makes a complete turn around from capturing Christians to essentially creating Christianity by spreading the gospel to gentiles after Jesus came to him on the road to Damascus.

Who do you know who has done a complete turn around in his or her life? (Merle Haggard comes to my mind- because of Johnnie Cash. And Johnnie Cas did to because of June Carter Cash) Or how have you been turned around in your life? I'm going to give you a few minutes to talk with the people sitting around you. We'll have a few minutes to share some of your stories after about 5 minutes.

Jesus had little tolerance for the way the religious leaders of his day were reading the Bible and interpreting the "Law". Or he questioned it. He contradicted it. People did not like hearing what he was saying. Jesus' refrain was to love God, love self and love others. Jesus could see that some things being taught by religious leaders were simply not right. And so His teaching turned people around and caused them to come out right.

Let us pray-

O God, ¹¹You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹²so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever. Thank you for your many gifts. Amen.

