

Scripture: Acts 9:1-19a

Sermon Title: "If God Can Use Ananias..."

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This morning, I want to share with you two stories. The first is of a convicted drug dealer and a career criminal. Jonathan spent 9 years of his life in prison for his deeds before turning his life around. He found God and found a path forward out of the cycle of crime his life was wrapped in. Now, after spending 3 years in seminary, which is where I had the privilege to meet him, and many years being mentored by pastors in his life, his life has been completely transformed and he is now a youth minister, striving to help the children of Maryland escape the cycles of drugs and crime that claim so many people. He is now striving to share God's love which transformed his life in wonderful, beautiful, powerful ways, praying that it will do the same for others.

The second story is of a man who grew up in the church. Has sought to follow God all his life, even when life was hard or he strayed from the path as we all do from time-to-time. This man had an elderly neighbor up the road - a neighbor who was a bit of a challenge. Now for years, they didn't speak, they didn't really know each other. But one day she showed up at the man's house, looking for help. Now she was not always the easiest person with whom to get along. She was a widow nearing I would guess 90 years of age, living alone, and she needed help. And after that first ask, she would always come to this man asking for help. And though this man found her to be perhaps annoying at times and he didn't terribly enjoy her company, he would always help because he felt that was what being a Christian meant - he felt that that's how he was called to care for his neighbor. He would mow her lawn when she asked. Help her in fix things around her property. Yes, he would complain from time-to-time, being his son I got to hear it, but my dad would always, whenever he could to help her. In this way, he was striving to live out his faith - maybe not perfectly for none of us really do - but yet to share God's love in acts of care.

Both of these stories contain callings – those moments when God gives direction in our lives and leads someone into something new – leads someone into a new way of being love in the world. One is of a life changing conversion and mission to care for the youth of his community. The other is a call to live out faith in the small acts of kindness to a difficult neighbor. Now, one may seem much more dramatic than the other, yet both are important and both show a willingness to follow. Both show the power of God in different ways to touch the heart. Both of these stories lead to love being shared in big and small ways – yet in all ways powerful.

In our Scripture reading today from the book of Acts, we also hear two different call stories of varying dramatic quality. We of course hear of Saul, more commonly known as Paul, and we hear of his wild experience on the road to Damascus. It is certainly dramatic – a bright flash from heaven, Jesus speaking to him, blindness which struck Paul and which humbled him greatly as he was then led by the hand into Damascus. And then in the town, for Paul to meet Ananias, a follower of Jesus, for the things like scales to fall from his eyes, for his strength to be regained in the presence of the church, and then, the part we did not hear today, about how from this point his preaching began – a ministry that was indeed so important and impactful in the spread of what would become known as the Christian faith. In this call, we have someone who went from be a persecutor of Jesus’ followers to a persuader of the truth of Jesus Christ. A big and powerful and intense conversion which leads to a call that transformed and grew the early church.

Yet, at the same time, there is another call taking place. One that I don’t think we often see when we hear this story – and this is the one that interests me the most today. This is the call given to Ananias – a call that may not appear as grand as the one given to Paul which is to take the message of Jesus to the Gentiles, to Kings, to all of Israel, but yet it is one that still holds such power because it comes the Lord. Ananias is already a follower of Jesus, a member of the early church which at this point is known not as the church but as “the Way”. And he is to go and meet Paul – not an easy task to walk up to

the one who has been happily dragging followers of Christ away and to greet him. His call here is, as I see it, simple yet profoundly powerful – a call to claim Paul as brother. His calling here is to be Paul's first experience of Christian community. To be with him most like at his baptism, to be with him as he regained his strength, and to introduce him to what it means to care for one another as an act of Christ-inspired love. This is a call that interests me the most today.

You know, this conversion and call story of Paul's often leads people to the conclusion that "If God can use Paul, someone who was so far from embracing Jesus, someone who was openly hostile to the early disciples, someone who was so far from God's path, surely if God can use Paul, God can use any of us." And this is true. However, there is another conclusion to be taken from this scripture that in this day and age, in these very moments in which we live, is a conclusion to which we should pay attention. Not if God can use Paul but if God can use Ananias. "If God can use Ananias, your average follower of Jesus, to extend a hand of Christ's love to someone on the other side – to someone who has been standing opposed to him and his beliefs, surely God can use any of us average followers of Jesus to be Christian community for all who need it." To care for one another as an act of Christ-inspired love. If God can use Ananias to do that, God can use us to do that too.

Callings from God are not only those big dramatic ones that send you out to preach like that call given to Paul or to my friend Jonathan. Callings from God can also take the form of those small, yet powerful acts of caring for others, like the call of Ananias or that of my father. So I ask you today - what is God calling you to do because I believe God is calling, for after all, there is such need in our world for people to take the path of love and care. How do you feel God calling you to live a life of Christ-inspired love this day? Really think about it – perhaps it is something that has been on your heart for some time, maybe it's something that you already do that God is encouraging you to continue, or maybe it's a call that is touching your life for the very first time in these shared moments today. And once you have an idea of the way that God is sending you

out into the world to be a living testimony of your faith and of God's love, the next question is simple yet as Ananias shows us it is not always easy to answer. Will you do it? Will you go? No matter the size of the call, whether it is one like Paul's or like Ananias', may we always strive for our answer to be "yes." Here I am Lord, send me. Amen.