

“Unraveled: Discovering a New Path”
Acts 9:1-19

Fear is a powerful motivator for action! It is one of our basic instincts for survival. We especially fear what we don't know or what we perceive to be a threat. Politicians, fundraisers, newscasters, advertisers, and even religious leaders know the power of fear and often use it to their advantage. In this time of pandemic and racial tensions, fear is taking center stage. And so today we look at a man who was strongly motivated by fear. He was full of fear and anger and thus became willing to inflict fear and violence on others to protect what he thought to be the right way of faith. This is the story of the Apostle Paul who was driven by fear until God unraveled his vision and understanding of life and the world.

The Apostle Paul was on the road to Damascus. He was on a mission driven by fear. He was certain that the followers of Jesus were wrong and that they were a threat to the stability of the country and the Jewish faith. There were many groups and sects in the Jewish faith, but this one seemed to be threatening the authority of the temple in Jerusalem, working for major social change, and claiming that the Messiah had already come. Paul is mentioned in chapter 7 of Acts. He was part of the group that approved the stoning of Stephen (a deacon in the church), the first martyr of the church. Saul/Paul was carrying orders from the high priest in Jerusalem to the city of Damascus in order to arrest people who were followers of the way of Jesus. He was very certain that what he was doing was right. He was certain that he was defending his faith against those who seemed to be destroying it. We all can relate to the experience of feeling absolutely right about something and believing it wholeheartedly. Paul was blind to the truth of the way of Christ. He could not imagine for a second that he was wrong. He was a vigilante who was determined to take justice into his own hands. His zeal led him to violence against the followers of Jesus and there was no stopping him. There was no logic to be introduced that could have changed Paul's mind. There was no talking him out of his rigid convictions.

Yet, something bigger than words and logic entered into the life of Paul and turned things around for him. It was the presence of God. The light of Christ came into his life in such a dramatic way that he was not able to see for several days and needed the help of his enemies in order to regain his vision. He had to go to the house of an enemy in order to experience mercy. Ananias struggled with his call to help Paul. Ananias was one of the disciples in Damascus. He did not react positively to God's call to go to Saul and lay hands on him. He too was motivated by fear at first. He knew about Paul's violence and was trying to protect his family. Who would blame him for that? We can relate to this because there are many times when the call of Christ on our lives takes us into uncharted territories of love and forgiveness. Paul was not immediately accepted by the other followers. Paul was someone to be feared instead of loved. He was the enemy! Ananias' heart had to be transformed as well to reach out beyond the limits of his own fears.

Fear is gripping our lives and our world right now, but so is love, forgiveness, and faith. A new path for love is being created for us to move forward. It is certainly different from what we would have ever imagined, but in the midst of chaos, there is always the potential

for our transformation. When the movement of Jesus was being born, there was resistance to this way of love and only those who were touched by the Holy Spirit were able to see with clarity that it was a new way to greater love and life instead of a threat to the status quo of fear and violence. The transformation from fear to love is not always easy and takes a deeper conversion of the heart. In his book *The Wisdom Pattern*, Richard Rohr quotes this, “The word *change* normally refers to new beginnings. But transformation, the mystery we’re examining, more often *happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart*. The pain of something old falling apart - chaos- invites the soul to listen at a deeper level. It invites, and sometimes forces, the soul to go to a new place because the old place is falling apart. Most of us would never go to new places in any other way. The mystics use many words to describe this chaos: fire, dark night, death, emptiness, abandonment, trial, the Evil One. Whatever it is, it does not feel good and it does not feel like God. We will do anything to keep the old thing from falling apart. This is when we need patience and guidance, and the *freedom to let go* instead of tightening our controls and certitudes. Perhaps Jesus is describing just this phenomenon when he says, ‘It is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it’ (Matthew 7:13-14). Not accidentally, he mentions this narrow road right after teaching the Golden Rule. He knows how much letting go it takes to ‘treat others as you would like them to treat you’ (7:12).”

Since we are so prone to the influences and biases of our culture that are often based in fear, our work is to open ourselves to different ways of knowing the world and of connecting others. In addition to our reliance on information and intellectual knowledge, spirituality (nurturing our relationship with God) offers us a path to see the world through the eyes of love. Experiencing the awesome and loving presence of God can shift our perception of reality. Nothing is the same once we have those experiences of utter awe and surrender just like Paul did!

One of the things that struck me recently in the words of John Lewis was his awareness of the need for inner work in addition to the outer work. He saw that working for racial justice in the civil rights movement had to come from a place of love. He saw that it was important for the person who was working for justice to be deeply grounded in seeing the divine spark in others, no matter how hidden or tarnished that spark might seem. In an interview from 2013 with Krista Tippett, he said this about the Civil Rights training for nonviolence, “First of all, you have to grow. It’s just not something that is natural. You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence. And in the religious sense, in the moral sense, you can say in the bosom of every human being, there is a spark of the divine. So you don’t have a right as a human to abuse that spark of the divine in your fellow human being. We, from time to time, would discuss if you see someone attacking you, beating you, spitting on you, you have to think of that person, you know, years ago that person was an innocent child, innocent little baby. And so what happened? Something go wrong? Did the environment? Did someone teach that person to hate, to abuse others? So you try to appeal to the goodness of every human being and you don’t give up. You never give up on anyone...The civil rights movement, above all, was a work of love. Yet even 50 years later, it is rare to find anyone who would use the word love to describe what we did.”

As life unravels around us and in this time of great disorientation, if we don't want fear to undo us completely, our work is to open ourselves to the divine love so that we may find a new way forward. Amen.