

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Acts 9:1-20
SERMON TITLE: A Transformed Life

On September 23, 2001, an interfaith event was held in New York City at Yankee Stadium to remember the victims of 9/11. One of the religious leaders offering a prayer that day was Rev. David Benke, the pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, and the elected president of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

On the PBS program that aired in 2002 about 9/11, Rev. Benke spoke of what happened to him after he prayed his prayer on a stage with representatives of other faiths: *The very next day*, he said, *I began to get messages filled with hate...from people...within my tradition....They just said, "You were wrong to be there. You never should have gone to Yankee Stadium....You have dishonored your faith."* One man said genuine terrorism was me. He said, *planes crash and people die, nothing big about that. Genuine terrorism was me giving that prayer.*

Within two months, a number of those people put together a petition and filed charges of heresy, saying that I am not part of the Christian Church because of what I did on that day....People who brought the charges against me are clergymen from my denomination.¹

Religion and religious zeal can be incredibly toxic and destructive. An orthodox Jewish rabbi interviewed in the same program recalled an incident in which an Orthodox Jew *went into a mosque in the city of Hebron and murdered 29 human beings*. The rabbi said that the man *had a deep connection to a tradition, a religious tradition in Judaism that pushed him there*.

The rabbi then made this observation from his own experience of living in Hebron during that time: *You can get so drunk on God that you don't see anything else....It's so easy to get*

¹ St. Peter's Lutheran Church-Brooklyn, NY. Web. 20 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.stpeter-brooklyn.org/frontline.html>>.

wrapped up in a messianic vision of how the world could be. And I know it's easy, because I did it....You believe anything is possible, because you have all the answers. Until it got so out of control that people I knew committed murder... It was a self-justifying system....Other people were just wrong. He then concluded: *It's amazing how good religion is at mobilizing people to do awful, murderous things.*²

Well, Saul knew something about this sort of religious zeal. He approved of the religious execution of Stephen. After Stephen's death, to use the language of Acts 8, Saul began *ravaging the church*. He entered *house after house, dragging off both men and women* and throwing them into prison.

This morning's text begins with Saul whipped up into a frenzy of religious zeal, *breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*. The Greek literally says that Saul was "*breathing in*" *the threats, almost as if he [was] internalizing them or muttering what he [was] going to do to the Christians under his breath*. The text then says that Saul *went to the high priest and 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*. John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed describe this kind of zeal as *religious vigilantism*.³ Another commentator has called Saul *a man of violence* who is, at this point in the story, described almost exclusively in terms of his violence.⁴

Now please note that the struggle depicted in these stories from Acts is within the Jewish family. Paul was a Pharisaic Jew out to stop the followers of Jesus who were also Jews. From

² Way, The. "Frontline: Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero: Interviews: Rabbi Brad Hirschfield." *PBS*. Web. 20 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/interviews/hirschfield.html>>.

³ "April 18, 2010." The United Church of Christ | No Matter Who You Are Or Where You Are On Life's Journey, You're Welcome Here. Web. 20 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/april-18-2010.html>>.

⁴ "Turn in the Road." *Religion Online*. Web. 20 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3058>>.

Saul's perspective, these followers of Jesus were guilty of blasphemy and they had to be stopped to protect the integrity of Saul's own tradition.

Now do we see any connections between this kind of religious zeal and the hateful attacks on David Benke from the people within his own faith community? I do. Do we see any connections between this kind of religious zeal and the orthodox rabbi's amazement at how *good religion is at mobilizing people to do awful, murderous things?*⁵ I do.

Let's face it—there is a shadow side to religious experience that we deny at our own peril. When religious zeal is wedded to the violent inclinations within us all—*awful, murderous things*⁶ can happen—and often do!

But here's the good news: Transformation is possible. It happened to Saul. We heard the story: a light from heaven, the voice of Jesus confronting Saul with his persecution, Saul's blindness, his vulnerability, no food or drink, help from a reluctant but obedient Ananias and other disciples in Damascus, new sight, baptism, renewed strength, and finally, a public proclamation: *He is the Son of God.*

Talk about transformation! By the end of the story, Saul is beginning to see with new eyes. He's saying words that would have said before. He now belongs to the Way—that community of disciples that he had once persecuted. And he would soon acquire a new name as Saul became Paul.

But make no mistake about it, Saul's religious zeal remained intact. In fact, God used it to propel him into the world as an instrument chosen to proclaim the name of Jesus *before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.*

⁵Way, The. "Frontline: Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero: Interviews: Rabbi Brad Hirschfield." *PBS*. Web. 20 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/interviews/hirschfield.html>>.

⁶ Ibid.

But notice this difference: Although Saul's religious zeal remain intact, violence was removed from the equation. He no longer persecuted the Jesus followers because he was now one of them. But he didn't turn around and use his old tactics against the new opponents he faced as a follower of Jesus.

In fact, Paul found himself on the receiving end of persecution—and he did indeed suffer for the sake of Jesus—but with no answering violence. When Saul turned to the Jesus Way, he gave up his violent ways.

A similar transformation happened to me. As I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s, I played games that involved pretending to kill other people. In other words, I practiced violence in my play.

And I learned these lessons well because as I grew up, I figured that violence in certain cases was justified against enemies who were trying to destroy the things that I valued. The church in which I was raised reinforced this point of view.

But then, in 1975, conversion came. There wasn't a light from heaven, although I did begin see things differently. Given my inclination to accept violence as a justifiable means of dealing with enemies, I began to think: Well, wouldn't Jesus have been justified in using violence against his enemies? And then a disturbing image came to mind: Jesus entering Jerusalem, hunting down the opposition, and then Jesus crucifying them! Can you imagine Pilate hanging from a cross?

But this isn't the story and this is not the Christ that I've staked my life on. It's not the Jesus Way—so in that moment of conversion—I renounced violence altogether while acknowledging that the inclination to violence is still a part of who I am and part of the culture in which I live—religious and otherwise.

The rabbi said, *It's amazing how good religion is at mobilizing people to do awful, murderous things*⁷. How true this is. But does it have to be this way? Is this what the Way of Jesus is about? Or is transformation possible for us even as it was for Saul?

⁷ Ibid.