

## I

I am convinced that the hardest words to say to someone are not, “I love you.” I think the three hardest words to say to someone are, “I was wrong about you.”

I think those are some of the hardest words to say, because no matter our age or station in life, once we human beings make up our minds that another human being is an enemy or a threat, it’s very hard for us to change our minds about that person. And I don’t think that’s necessarily because we’re just stubborn. I think it’s a deep feature of our human biology.

## II

Long, long ago, our human ancestors learned that we human beings aren’t the biggest or fastest creatures that occupy this planet – but we have a remarkable ability to communicate and cooperate. And so we learned to survive as a species to work as a team, as family units and tribes – to share resources and to defend each other from a scary world.

And we got really good at cooperating and communicating, and the human species began to grow larger in number. So much so that soon tribes began to bump into other tribes, and our ancestors had to learn how to make a snap assessment as to whether that human being who was not a part of their tribe was a friend or an enemy. And such an assessment about whether

another human being was a friend or a foe had to be made in just a nanosecond, because it was often a matter of life and death.

Even though our species has evolved and the world has grown so much smaller, even though we encounter difference in our daily lives on a scale today that even our great-grandparents could scarcely have imagined, that mechanism that’s deep in our human subconscious still lives in all of us today.

And once the decision has been made that another human being is not one of “us,” that they’re a threat or an enemy, it is very hard, if not nearly impossible, to undo, because it’s so deeply rooted in our human nature. In fact, it’s so hard for us to change our minds about someone we have already decided is a threat that it would take an act of God to undo it, which leads us to our story for this morning.

In our story this morning, we’re going to meet two men who discover that they were wrong about each other, and about deep matters of their human identity, of faith, of life itself. When the story begins, they are mortal enemies, but by the time the story ends, by the grace and providence of God, they will call each other, “brother.”

## III

Beginning today and for the next few Sundays, we’re turning our attention to some stories from the earliest days of

the church, from a book called the Acts of the Apostles, or simply, “Acts” for short. In our reading from Acts today, we’re going to meet two men: Saul and Ananias.

Saul, as he was then known, was perhaps both the most respected and the most feared man in Jerusalem in those days after the first Easter.

Saul’s credentials among the religious authorities were impeccable. He was classically educated, and he knew the Hebrew Scriptures backwards and forwards. He loved his faith community and had a deep concern for maintaining discipline and order.

Saul also held Roman citizenship, which meant that he had access to the Roman government in a way that few other of his fellow first-century Jews could ever hope to attain.

Because Saul had a foot in both of these worlds, in both first-century Jewish life as well as first-century Roman government, he was deeply concerned about this group of his fellow Jews who made such a fuss about Jesus of Nazareth.

Saul did not buy their story about their rabbi, a troublemaker who had been tried and convicted for blasphemy and sedition, who was executed by the Roman authorities and buried in a borrowed tomb, and yet these people claimed Jesus wasn’t dead after all. Saul believed that these people were fomenting schism within the Jewish

community and also threatening the peace the Romans were determined to enforce at the point of a spear, so in Saul’s mind, they had to be stopped.

And yet, to the amazement and frustration of both the Jewish and Roman authorities, it seemed that the harder that this little group was pressed, the more they were persecuted, the more they seemed to thrive and grow. In fact, word had come down to Jerusalem that there was a small but growing band of these people up in Damascus. This was a problem. This “Way” was beginning to spread beyond Jerusalem. So Saul went to the chief priest in Jerusalem and obtained arrest warrants for anyone he could find there who belonged to this “way,” and then he set out on the road toward Damascus.

Ananias, on the other hand, we don’t know anything about other than he was a disciple of Jesus living in Damascus sometime during the first century. We don’t know what he did for a living, whether he had a family, or how or when he came to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah. All we know is that word had come to Damascus that Saul was on his way up from Jerusalem, and that meant trouble for Ananias. And little did he know that he and Saul were on a collision course.

So listen now for a Word from God from Acts 9:1-19.

*1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high*

priest 2 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. 3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8 Saul 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. 9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11 The 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, 12 and 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." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 15 But 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; 16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So 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." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Saul was convinced that he was right, that these people who called themselves "the Way" were a threat, and everything in his educational and professional and faith background to that point in his life told him as much. He was a man on a mission, convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was in the right.

For his part, Ananias was convinced he was right, too. Although he had never met Saul, he knew his reputation. He knew that Saul was a threat, a man to be avoided at all costs. And so when God called to Ananias in a vision and told Ananias to go across town and lay hands on Saul, Ananias said, in Ryan's Revised Translation of the Greek, "Um, no thanks. We must have a bad connection on this call, God. You can't possibly want *me* to go across

town and talk to *him*.

But God has ways of dealing with our judgments about one another. Saul, was so convinced that he was in the right and that those people were wrong that God had to knock him down and strike him blind and not let him eat or drink for three days.

Ananias was convinced that he was right about Saul, too. And he started to tell God about all the reasons why he was right, but when God cut him off and said, "Go, for he is the instrument whom I have chosen," at least Ananias had the good sense to listen and obey.

Both men were convinced that they were right about each other. This story often appears in our bibles under the headline, "The Conversion of Saul," but I think both men were transformed. Both men were touched by the hand of God and transformed from enemies into brothers. Both men were called by God to get up and go. Both men were called to change.

And you know what they say about change? The only person who likes change is a wet baby, and yet all through Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation and back again, comes God's call - get up and go. Get up and go, said God in the story of Genesis to a childless couple named Abraham and Sarah. Get up and go from everything that is known and familiar and safe, and go to a land that you don't know, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you

will be a blessing, and in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Get up and go, said God in Exodus, to a group of people who had been slaves for over 400 years. Get up and cross through the waters of the Red Sea on dry ground. Get up and go and make a new life and I myself will feed you and provide for your every need. Get up and go and be transformed into a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

Get up and go, said a rabbi named Jesus to some fishermen. Get up and come and follow me.

Get up and go into the city, said the Lord to Saul. Get up and go to the street called Straight, said the Lord to Ananias. And both men got up and went.

But I wonder. What if they hadn't? What might have happened if Saul had just told his men to turn around and take him home to Jerusalem? What might have happened if Ananias had told God that there was no way in Sheol that he was going to talk to a man like Saul?

Not to put too fine a point on it, but everything that we know of the Bible and everything we know of the Church would be completely different. For it was Saul, whose Roman name was Paul, whose letters ended up being responsible for over half of the books that we have in our New Testament. It was the journeys that Paul took, thanks to his Roman passport and the Roman

highway system and the Roman command of the seas, that enabled him to preach the gospel and plant churches all over the Mediterranean world, churches that became the ancestral home of everyone in the world who calls on the name of Christ.

Who knows how the biblical story might have unfolded if Saul and Ananias hadn't had the courage to change their minds about each other?

#### IV

The only person who likes change is a wet baby. But the call to follow Jesus is *always* a call to change.

So what in your life needs a change this morning, my friend?

What opinions and notions and biases are you holding deep in your subconscious that need to be brought forward, need to be reevaluated and reexamined in the light of the gospel?

Who have you written off as your enemy, as someone beyond hope or redemption?

Could it be that that one that you long ago decided was your enemy is actually your brother?

Could it be that that once you long ago decided was a threat to you and your tribe is actually your sister?

#### V

As we live into this Eastertide,

may we be humble enough, when we hear a voice calling our name, to say "Here I am!"

May we be willing to step out of what is known, what is safe, what is comfortable, and into an uncertain, undefined, and unbounded future.

For maybe, just maybe, we, too, are instruments whom God has chosen to bring his name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.

And maybe, just maybe, we, too, will be counted worthy enough to bear his name.

Thanks be to God. Amen.