

Acts 9:1-20
August 30, '09

Unbinding Your Heart - #1
"AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE"

LAST WEEK, FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF DEMOCRATIC SENATOR TED KENNEDY, A NEWSPAPER COLUMN BEGAN WITH THESE WORDS: "*TED KENNEDY WAS A TRUE AMERICAN ICON. HE WAS A MUCH-ADMIRED PUBLIC STATESMAN, COMMITTED PUBLIC SERVANT AND A GIANT OF THE UNITED STATES SENATE. HE EMBODIED THE VIRTUE OF PUBLIC SERVICE AFTER DEDICATING HIS LIFE TO LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS TO OUR NATION'S PROBLEMS.*"

THAT WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE ARTICLE.

IT CONCLUDED LIKE THIS: "*HE REVERED AND HONORED HIS TITLE OF 'SENATOR' BY DEDICATION TO HIS BELIEFS, AND THROUGH SHEER HARD WORK. HIS MEMORY WILL LINGER FOR YEARS TO COME, AND MANY WILL MISS & MOURN THIS GREAT SENATOR. I MISS MY FELLOW SENATOR & SPECIAL FRIEND.*"

YOU DON'T FIND THOSE WORDS UNUSUAL.

THEY ARE WORDS YOU EXPECT TO HEAR AT THE PASSING OF SOMEONE LIKE TED KENNEDY.

YOU *DON'T* HOWEVER, EXPECT TO HEAR THEM QUOTED IN A SERMON ON SUNDAY MORNING.

IT'S NOT THE WORDS THEMSELVES, THOUGH, THAT ARE THE REASON FOR SHARING THEM WITH YOU.

IT'S THE ONE WHO WROTE THOSE WORDS.

THOSE ARE THE WORDS OF REPUBLICAN SENATOR ORRIN HATCH OF UTAH, A GREAT SENATOR HIMSELF & AS STAUNCHLY CONSERVATIVE AS KENNEDY WAS LIBERAL.

OVER THE YEARS, THE TWO MEN FORMED WHAT CAN ONLY BE CATEGORIZED AS "AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE."

A SERIES OF TELEVISION ADS IN RECENT YEARS WAS ENTITLED THAT – "AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE."

IT FEATURED TWO DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT INDIVIDUALS WITH A SHARED "SAVE THE PLANET" MESSAGE.

THERE WAS NANCY PELOSI TEAMED WITH NEWT GINGRICH AND AL SHARPTON SITTING WITH PAT ROBERTSON.

AS UNLIKELY AS THOSE ALLIANCES ARE, I THINK THE ONE WE SEE IN THIS PASSAGE IN ACTS, IS EVEN MORE UNLIKELY.

PAUL & ANANIAS.

ONE WOULD BE HARD-PRESSED TO FIND A MORE UNLIKELY ALLIANCE THAN THIS ONE.

AS WE BEGIN THE "UNBINDING YOUR HEART" SERIES, I THINK IT MAY BE HELPFUL TO LOOK AT EACH OF THESE MEN BECAUSE I THINK WE CAN LEARN A GREAT DEAL FROM BOTH OF THEM.

FIRST, THERE'S PAUL.

HE IS REFERRED TO HERE AS SAUL.

THAT BECOMES SOMEWHAT CONFUSING TO US.
TO HIS FELLOW JEWS, HE WAS SAUL – HIS JEWISH NAME.
IN THE WIDER WORLD, HE WAS PAUL – A ROMAN NAME.
SO THE CHANGE FROM “SAUL” TO “PAUL” WASN’T REALLY RELATED TO HIS CONVERSION.
PAUL’S STORY IS THE CONSUMMATE STORY OF CONVERSION – NOT JUST IN THE BIBLE, BUT IN ALL OF HISTORY.

THERE SIMPLY NEVER WAS NOR EVER WILL BE A GREATER STORY OF A TRANSFORMED LIFE THAN THIS ONE.

IT’S VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE.

IT’S IMPOSSIBLE BECAUSE PAUL WENT FROM BEING CHRISTIANITY’S MOST-HATED *OPPONENT* TO ITS MOST INFLUENTIAL *PROPONENT*.

AND IT HAPPENED IN A FLASH – LITERALLY “A FLASH.”

HE WAS “BLINDED BY THE LIGHT” – EVOKING MEMORIES OF BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN OR MANFRED MANN FOR SOME OF YOU.

WE READ A STORY LIKE PAUL’S & WE THINK THAT’S THE WAY IT’S SUPPOSED TO BE FOR ALL OF US.

THOSE OF US WHO *DON’T* HAVE A “BLINDED BY THE LIGHT” STORY FEEL AS THOUGH WE’VE BEEN CHEATED OR, EVEN WORSE, THAT OUR CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT ISN’T AS REAL AS THAT OF THOSE WHO *HAVE* EXPERIENCED SUCH A MOMENT.

I REMEMBER SERVING A CHURCH IN A COMMUNITY WHERE THE MEGACHURCH (IN THE DAYS PRIOR TO ‘MEGACHURCHES’) HAD GONE THROUGH A LONG PASTORAL VACANCY.

EVERYONE WONDERED WHO THE NEW PASTOR WOULD BE IN THIS HIGH-PROFILE CONGREGATION.

FINALLY, AFTER A SEARCH THAT LASTED MORE THAN TWO YEARS, A NEW LEADER WAS CALLED.

I SAW SOMEONE FROM THAT CHURCH THE DAY AFTER THE NEW PASTOR HAD PREACHED HIS FIRST SERMON.

THIS PERSON WAS VERY EXCITED ABOUT HIM.

HE SAID, “*OH, HIS FIRST SERMON WAS GREAT. HE TOLD US HE’D BEEN AN ALCOHOLIC & WAS CONVERTED TO CHRIST.*”

I ASKED WHAT ELSE HE KNEW ABOUT HIM OR WHAT ELSE WAS INCLUDED IN THE SERMON, BUT MY FRIEND DIDN’T REALLY REMEMBER ANYTHING ELSE.

FOR MONTHS AFTERWARDS, ANY TIME I WOULD ASK SOMEONE FROM THAT CHURCH HOW THINGS WERE GOING & HOW THEY LIKED THEIR NEW PASTOR, THE FIRST THING I WOULD HEAR WOULD BE, “*DID YOU KNOW HE WAS AN ALCOHOLIC?*”

I FELT CHEATED.

WORSE THAN THAT, I FELT I WAS CHEATING MY OWN CONGREGATION.

WHEN SOMEONE FROM *MY* CONGREGATION WAS ASKED ABOUT THEIR PASTOR, WHAT COULD THEY SAY?

“OH, HE’S A NICE GUY.”

WHY HAD I NOT BEEN DELIVERED, TRANSFORMED, CONVERTED FROM SOMETHING HORRIBLE & ABOMINABLE IN MY LIFE TO GIVE MY MEMBERS SOMETHING TO GLOAT ABOUT WITH THEIR FRIENDS?!

PAUL HAD SUCH AN EXPERIENCE OF DELIVERY, TRANSFORMATION & CONVERSION, BUT THIS STORY IS NOT MEANT TO BE THE STANDARD BY WHICH ALL CHRISTIAN COMMITMENTS ARE JUDGED.

GOD WORKS WITH EACH ONE OF US AS AN INDIVIDUAL.

GOD’S MEANS ARE TAILOR-MADE.

GOD’S CALL IS FOR YOU & YOU ALONE.

WE’LL COME BACK TO THAT LATER.

LET’S TAKE A LOOK AT ANANIAS.

IT WAS ANDY WARHOL WHO SAID, 40 YEARS AGO, *“IN THE FUTURE, EVERYONE WILL BE WORLD-FAMOUS FOR 15 MINUTES.”*

WARHOL, BEING THE BIZARRE CHARACTER THAT HE WAS, LATER TRIED TO CONFUSE JOURNALISTS BY CLAIMING THAT WHAT HE REALLY SAID WAS *“IN THE FUTURE, 15 PEOPLE WILL BE FAMOUS”* OR *“IN 15 MINUTES, EVERYBODY WILL BE FAMOUS.”*

WE GET THE POINT OF HIS ORIGINAL REMARK & ANANIAS WAS AN EXAMPLE OF ITS REALITY 2,000 YEARS AGO.

HE STEPS ONTO THE NEW TESTAMENT STAGE & JUST AS QUICKLY STEPS OFF OF IT.

HE’S MENTIONED ONLY HERE IN ACTS & LATER IN THE BOOK WHEN PAUL IS SHARING HIS OWN STORY OF HIS CONVERSION EXPERIENCE.

LUKE HAS PAUL SAYING, *“A CERTAIN ANANIAS, WHO WAS A DEVOUT MAN ACCORDING TO THE LAW & WELL SPOKEN OF BY ALL THE JEWS LIVING THERE...”*

AND THAT’S IT.

ANANIAS APPEARS ONLY HERE IN THIS STORY OF PAUL’S CONVERSION & THEN HE’S GONE FOR GOOD.

AND YET, IN REALITY, ANANIAS’ 15 MINUTES OF FAME HAS HAD A PROFOUND IMPACT ON THE ENTIRE WORLD.

THIS UNLIKELY ALLIANCE MAKES THESE TWO MEN DEPENDENT UPON ONE ANOTHER.

IF NOT FOR THE WILLINGNESS OF ANANIAS TO HEED THE CALL OF GOD, THERE WOULD BE NO REASON WE WOULD KNOW OF PAUL.

IF NOT FOR THE WILLINGNESS OF PAUL TO HEED THE CALL OF GOD, THERE WOULD BE NO REASON WE WOULD KNOW OF ANANIAS.

LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT THE TWO OF THEM TOGETHER & SEE HOW – EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE – THEIR EXPERIENCES WERE REALLY QUITE SIMILAR.

GOD SPOKE TO EACH OF THEM.

AS HE WAS GOING TO DAMASCUS TO ROUND UP CHRISTIANS FOR ARREST, PERSECUTION & PERHAPS EVEN DEATH, PAUL WAS THROWN FROM HIS HORSE & CONFRONTED WITH THE VOICE OF GOD SPEAKING TO HIM.

“SAUL, SAUL, WHY DO YOU PERSECUTE ME?”

UPON HEARING THE VOICE, PAUL HAS TO ASK, *“WHO ARE YOU, LORD?”*

IT'S A VOICE HE DOESN'T RECOGNIZE.

IT'S THE VOICE OF ONE WITH WHOM HE HAS NO RELATIONSHIP.

JUMP AHEAD TO THE ENCOUNTER ANANIAS HAD WITH THAT SAME VOICE.

IN VERSE 10, *“THE LORD SAID TO HIM IN A VISION, ‘ANANIAS.’ HE ANSWERED, ‘HERE I AM, LORD.’”*

NOTICE THE DIFFERENCE HERE.

A SINGLE WORD – THE CALL OF HIS NAME & ANANIAS KNEW IT IMMEDIATELY.

HE WAS ACCUSTOMED TO THE VOICE OF GOD.

HE HAD A REGULAR, ONGOING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD & HIS IMMEDIATE RESPONSE WAS *“HERE I AM, LORD.”*

I WANT TO COME BACK TO SOMETHING I SAID EARLIER.

I SAID, *“GOD'S CALL IS FOR YOU & YOU ALONE.”*

HERE'S WHERE I THINK WE CAN MAKE ANOTHER CONNECTION BETWEEN ANANIAS & PAUL IN THIS UNLIKELY ALLIANCE.

EACH ONE OF THEM WAS *CALLED* BY GOD.

WHAT JESUS SAID TO PAUL WAS, *“GET UP, GO TO THE CITY & YOU WILL BE TOLD WHAT TO DO.”*

WHAT JESUS SAID TO ANANIAS WAS ALSO, *“GET UP & GO...”*

WE MAKE A MISTAKE WHEN WE REDUCE CONVERSION TO AN EXPERIENCE THAT MEANS WE'LL BE SAVED OR SAFE.

CONVERSION IS REALLY A CALL.

IT'S A CALL FROM GOD TO ACT.

THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED TO BOTH ANANIAS & PAUL.

IT'S WHAT HAPPENS TO US AS WELL.

GOD'S CALL IS FOR YOU & YOU ALONE.

GOD HAS A SPECIFIC, TAILOR-MADE CALL FOR YOU.

YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED SOMETHING IN YOUR LIFE IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST & YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS.

GOD IS CALLING YOU – IN A SPECIFIC FASHION – TO SHARE THAT EXPERIENCE WITH OTHERS.

HE'S CALLING YOU TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIFE OF ANOTHER PERSON.
THERE'S A WONDERFUL STORY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF A CHURCH IN FLORIDA.
MOST PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH WERE UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS FOLKS.
THEY'D BEEN IN CHURCH ALL THEIR LIVES.
BUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAS CHANGING & THE CORNER ON WHICH THE CHURCH WAS
LOCATED BECAME A GATHERING SPOT FOR PROSTITUTES.
THE MEMBERS, AS YOU CAN IMAGINE, WEREN'T AT ALL PLEASED WITH THIS.
BUT ONE EVENING AS A FAITHFUL CHURCH MEMBER, A RETIRED SCHOOL TEACHER, LEFT CHOIR
PRACTICE SHE SAW ONE OF THE PROSTITUTES LEANING AGAINST A LAMPPOST.
SINGING.
LATER SHE WOULD SAY THAT SHE WAS "PUSHED BY THE SPIRIT."
SHE COULD THINK OF NO OTHER WORDS TO DESCRIBE THE FEELING SHE HAD.
SHE WALKED UP TO THE WOMAN & SAID, "*HI. MY NAME IS MARIAN. I WAS JUST SINGING WITH MY
CHOIR IN THERE. YOU HAVE A BEAUTIFUL SINGING VOICE.*"
"YEAH - I LOVE SINGING. MY NAME IS SHEENA."
*"SHEENA, YOU OUGHT TO BE SINGING FOR THE LORD. HOW'D YOU LIKE TO JOIN OUR CHURCH
CHOIR?"*
MARIAN WAS STUNNED WHEN THE WOMAN SAID "YES."
THE NEXT WEEK, SURE ENOUGH, THERE SHE WAS.
SHE BEGAN SINGING WITH THE CHOIR & WITH HER NEW FRIEND MARIAN - THE RETIRED
SCHOOL TEACHER - SHEENA WENT BACK TO SCHOOL & GOT HER GED.
IT WAS ALL BECAUSE MARY HEARD THE CALL FROM GOD TO WELCOME SOMEONE INTO THE
PLACE THAT MEANT SO MUCH IN HER LIFE.
SHEENA DIDN'T STOP WITH HER GED.
SHE DECIDED TO GO TO COLLEGE.
SHE HAD EXPERIENCED SUCH LOVE & HOPE & STRENGTH & ACCEPTANCE FROM HER FRIENDS IN
CHURCH THAT SHE DEVELOPED A NEW SENSE OF SELF-RESPECT.
SHEENA GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE & ENROLLED IN MEDICAL SCHOOL.
SHEENA HAD SENSED THAT CALL FROM GOD.
SHE FELT A CLAIM UPON HER LIFE.
SHE GRADUATED FROM MEDICAL SCHOOL & NOW RUNS A MEDICAL CLINIC.
AND WHERE IS THAT CLINIC LOCATED?
IN THAT CHURCH ON THE CORNER WHERE SHE ONCE STOOD AS A PROSTITUTE UNTIL SOMEONE
HEARD & ANSWERED A CALL FROM GOD TO SIMPLY TELL THEIR STORY & INVITE HER INTO THAT
FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS.

**MORE THAN LIKELY, YOUR CALL WON'T BE AS DRAMATIC AS THE CALL MARIAN ANSWERED.
BUT YOU CAN REST ASSURED THAT GOD IS INDEED CALLING YOU.
GOD IS CALLING YOU TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIFE OF ANOTHER PERSON.
PERHAPS THAT CALL WILL CREATE AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE.
IT'S A CALL TO SIMPLY SHARE YOUR STORY – A CALL TO SHARE YOUR LIFE – A CALL TO HELP
SOMEONE ELSE UNDERSTAND THE LOVE, THE GRACE, THE ACCEPTANCE, THE FORGIVENESS & THE
CHALLENGE TO A NEW WAY OF LIFE THAT CAN BE EXPERIENCED IN THE FELLOWSHIP OF FAITH. AMEN.**

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