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Third Sunday of Easter

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:16

Don't Give Up

Acts 9:1-19a

A. *On sinners who need to be converted.*

B. *On the work God calls you to do.*

I would like to begin by asking you a simple yet very powerful question. Would you rather be a loser or a quitter? Oh, yes, I certainly know neither of these are good and no one willfully chooses to be either. But let's face it life is tough, in many ways life is a fight. Certainly our walk with the Lord and our faith in Jesus as we live in a world of sin is a fight, that is a picture God paints for us in the pages of Scripture time and time again. Would you rather be a loser or a quitter.

What makes losing so difficult is that we know someone or something has bettered us. It shows us that we are not the best and that we do have limits. No one likes that. It is humbling. Yet how much better is it to try and fail than to simply give up? If one fights and struggles and gives it their best then there is certainly dignity and honor even in losing.

Most people, especially Americans, if given these two options would rather be a loser than a quitter. There is something about struggling and taking on great challenges that makes life what it is and makes people who they are. So then why is there so much quitting around us?

It's hard not to give up sometimes. Oh yes, we may like to think that we are faithful and persistent in what God calls us to do but if we take a moment could not each of us think of at least one or two people who are so far gone that to share the message of Jesus with them would be an exercise of futility.

What do you do with that person who was raised to know God and the Bible, maybe they even attended Christian day school or at minimum went to Vacation Bible School or were even confirmed. It's not they lack knowledge, it's just that they lack faith. They are indifferent or worse they are completely turned off from the faith. You offer them an initiation to come to church and there is always an excuse always a "something." You want to say and share something positive about church and they bring up an incident that happened a long time ago that has supposedly soured them forever to church. "If that's the kind of people the church is and that's how they act I don't want any part of it."

What do we do? Like Charlie Brown who is encouraged by Lucy to give just one more attempt to kick the football only to have it taken away from us and we fall on our back looking up into the sky in failure resolving not to do that again. Sometimes we don't do it again. Our lips fall silent, we stop inviting, stop confronting. Then the devil has won.

The reason why the conversion of Saint Paul is such an important text for the Easter season is not just the chronology but the power. The power of the

Gospel, the power of the once dead now risen Jesus Christ is the power to raise the spiritually dead to new life. Yes, in sometimes unexpected and amazing ways.

Imagine the Christians at Damascus. **"Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem."** (verses 1-2). Do you really think that those Christians in Damascus didn't know what was developing? Do you really think they didn't hear the talk and the anticipation of Saul's arrival to put an end to these followers of Christ. Even listen to Luke's tone here. Saul was still breathing out murderous threats. Yes, this wasn't a quiet affair but one of fear and intimidation. Yes, you bet they knew what was coming.

We can only imagine that many of the the Christians at Damascus were praying for Saul. After all Jesus Himself told His followers to **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."** (Matthew 5:44). What prayers would the Damascan Christians have been lifting up to God? Would they have been boldly praying for Saul's conversion? Perhaps, but more likely they would have been praying for God's hand simply to protect them from the imminent danger. Why?

Apart from the Chief Priest and his closest friends perhaps no one would have been least predicted to become a believer. It was Saul who was there at the stoning of Stephen. Such people do not change easily. It would take a miracle, a direct act of God. Of course that is exactly what God did.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." (verses 3-6).

In the midst and at the heart of this vision of Jesus is something simple however. A question and a call. Isn't it amazing that even in the great miraculous events such as this one God still works through the simple power of His word. Jesus confronted Saul with the power of the law--"why do you persecute me?" The Gospel is clear: the Gospel is visibly before Saul: it is Jesus obviously very much alive and glorified risen from the dead!

What is so beautiful about this is not that it is so alien from who we are today and what we are capable of but because it is so similar and available to all of us. Am I stating that we can confront people just as powerfully as Jesus did Saul on the road to Damascus? In a way--Yes!--that is exactly what I am saying.

Whenever you or I confront people with the words of Scripture we are confronting them with the miraculous. God promises that the words of the Bible are Spirit and truth. God promises that His word never ever goes forth without effect or power. Does this mean everyone is converted, that everyone we speak the word of God to will become a St. Paul? Sadly no, of course not. But it does

mean that we are doing something important and bold and the conversion of Saul is God's reminder to us that no one but no one is too far gone and is beyond God's grace or working in this world. It teaches us to never give up on someone.

Who is your Saul? Is this person making you more cynical about God's activity in this world? Is this person grieving you so that you don't want to dwell too much on sin and its eventual consequence? This is how the devil would want you react. What is our alternative? How do we remain faithful to God?

Today is God's reminder to us that situations and even people who may seem so terribly hopeless and forgone are not actually so. Today calls us to act in the world wherever and whenever we are and to not give up. We simply never know what God has in store for people's lives and we simply do not know exactly what God is going to send our way. We can know however that God will equip us and guide us in what needs to be done. We need to trust in God; God is powerful and He is active in the world.

How much trust did it take for Ananias to hear God's message regarding Saul and what God did in his life?

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (verses 10-16).

I find it comforting to know that I am not the person who I am with the family I have and the church I belong to all by chance. That is not how God works. No, we are who we are with the tools and talents and abilities all by God's grace. We have the people in our lives--the faithful and the unfaithful all for a reason and a purpose. Nothing is overlooked nothing is haphazard.

Who did Saul need after his conversion? Saul needed Ananias. Why? We don't know all the details but we do know that this is who God placed in Saul's life at this time.

Ananias was a man of faith and of trust. Not every Christian and not every Christian leader could have perhaps been so understanding and trusting of God to allow one of the most violent opposers of the faith to be welcomed.

We may think that conversion and witnessing is such a complicated affair--God shows us otherwise.

When God opens a window of opportunity for the Christian, the Christian usually knows what to do and how to do it. Look how easy God made this for Ananias: go to the house of Judas on Straight Street; place your hands on him

and restore his sight. Neither of these things were difficult or beyond Ananias' means. We almost may say that God's task for Ananias was too simple for him. It is almost as if Ananias is questioning how dramatic an event it was. God's response: "Go!"

Our same great God who converted Saul is the same God who opens windows of opportunity for us today. We may often think that things must be incomprehensibly difficult and complicated. When opportunities arise the Christian knows what to do.

Ananias' great action is summed up in a single word. "Brother." In his trust in God and in the work that God placed before him Ananias spoke the single greatest word he could here from those he was originally going to persecute.

"Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." (verse 17). The power of the Gospel is to wipe away every sin, every past, everything that divides, hinders and hurts.

There is no greater work that we can do than to deliver the message of the Gospel. God does open windows; God does provide opportunities. When God does so we must take them. In God's grace and in His providence we can be assured that we will know what to say because we will know what people need to hear from God. **"Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."** (verse 19).

Saint Paul of course would go on and he would suffer much for the kingdom. In his words, works, and actions St. Paul did more than any other person in the early church to get the message out. St. Paul was a man that from an earthly perspective would have been universally written off as unconvertible, but he was also one called by God, and one touched, healed and ministered to by Ananias.

St. Paul would be one of the greatest proclaimers of the Gospel--the full free gift God offers to all people; the gift of restoration, renewal and newness. How often when things became difficult and discouraging did Paul think back to how powerful and life changing a word from God's faithful really is? How often did he remember that word "brother" and it gave him the inspiration to not give up and to keep going on? Today you have a Saul, maybe more than one in your life; but today you also have the Gospel of Jesus and the blessing to give that to others.

Great things do happen because God calls people to faith and calls the faithful to do great things. God never gives up, and neither do we. Happy Easter. Amen.