

## **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Damascus**

Sermon text: Acts 9:1-19

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September 4, 2011

### **I. A tale of temperament**

I think I've mentioned before that I was a basketball player in high school. I may have talked about feeling like I was a power forward trapped in a point guard's body. I was not a star player on the team, but I was a competitive player. The problem for me now is I have trouble turning off that drive to play hoops competitively. I have a hard time playing basketball for fun.

For me, if you're going to play the game, you play to win. I'm going to play tough, physical defense on you. I'm going to block you out – hard, when we go to the boards for a rebound. I'm going to give it 100% and get all hot and sweaty and red in the face. Off the court, I'm usually a pretty nice, even-tempered kind of guy, but when I lace up the high-tops and walk onto the basketball court, it's a different story. Like I said, I struggle with playing basketball for fun.

The issue that crops up for me from time to time is that my competitiveness can spill over to other sports. Like the time a few years ago at a church picnic. It was a beautiful late spring afternoon in Central Florida. Folks in the congregation had gathered in the shade of some oak trees to enjoy a bountiful covered dish lunch and some friendly conversation. After lunch, a number of us went out to a field to play softball. We divided up the teams with men and women, boys and girls on both teams.

It was enjoyable: the teams were evenly matched, the kids were having a good time, and the score was tied late in the game. There was a woman from the other team on second base, representing the "go ahead" run for them. I was playing shortstop for our team. Their batter hit a single to left field that was picked up cleanly by a middle school boy on our team. He didn't have a strong enough arm to make the throw to the plate, so he threw it to me as the "cut-off man." As I turned to throw it home, the woman from the other team, who had been on second base, was rounding third. Our catcher, who was an elementary-school aged girl, had wandered away towards first base for some reason, so there was no one at home plate!

Can you picture the situation in your mind? Well I took off running to try to tag the woman out before she made it home and scored the go ahead run! She wasn't exactly tearing up the base path, so I caught up with her a step or two before she got to home plate. Since both of us were running, when I tagged her out with my glove with the ball in it, I might have done it a little harder than I intended. She fell down and tumbled past home plate. She was unhurt, but had picked up some grass in her hair from the fall and gotten dirt on her jeans and t-shirt when she sprawled across the ground.

My first inclination was to be happy to have prevented the run from scoring, but then I realized that I'd gotten a little carried away in my actions. It wasn't the right thing to do to chase her down and then knock her down, even though it was not intentional, when I tagged her out. Judging by the kidding I got from people in the church over the next several years, it's safe to say that my competitiveness was out of place in that situation. Playing sports to win is something that's been engrained in me and I have a hard time turning it off.

That's why, when I read about Saul of Tarsus, the one who became known as the apostle Paul, I feel like I have some degree of insight into his temperament. From what we know about him from the Bible, he was a pretty intense kind of guy. He took his duty as a Pharisee very seriously. I think it's helpful for us to keep that in mind as we consider what happened to Saul

as he made the journey on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus.

If you look back at the very end of Acts, chapter 7, you will find the first time Saul is mentioned in the Bible. It was when very religious Jews were stoning Stephen to death. Stephen was also a Jew, but he believed that Jesus was the Messiah who had been resurrected from the dead. In Acts 7:58 we find these words about the stoning of Stephen: “Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.” Acts 8:1 adds the comment: “And Saul approved of their killing him.”

In fact, not only did Saul approve of the stoning of Stephen, he felt compelled by his religious zeal to get into the act himself. After Stephen was dead, Acts 8:1 goes on to tell us that a severe persecution broke out against those who believed Jesus was the Messiah. His followers scattered to places outside of Jerusalem for safety. Listen to what Saul did as it’s described in Acts 8:3: “But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.”

Now that’s religious zeal. It’s important for us to keep that in mind about Saul – he was a deeply committed Jew at the time he set out from Jerusalem for Damascus. He believed he was keeping the Law of Moses and honoring God by doing his best to get rid of the troublemakers who insisted that the crucified rabbi from Galilee was the Messiah and had been resurrected from the dead. Here’s how Saul described that period of his life to the Philippians:

**If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.**

The Saul who set from Jerusalem was serious about his religion. Listen again to the way our text for this morning began: “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, 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.”

## **II. A trail of transformation**

Then it happened: this very religious, very intense, very zealous Pharisee had a personal encounter with the last person in the world he expected to meet – Jesus, the risen Christ. Listen again to words that may be very familiar from Acts 9:3-6:

**Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”**

That moment, that personal encounter with the risen Lord, was the event that changed Saul’s life. There was a dramatic transformation in him after he met Jesus. He was changed from a zealously religious Jew into a passionate follower of the Master. He became Christ’s apostle to those outside the Jewish faith who did not know Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

There is a whole lot more we could talk about in the text, but for us in our MapQuest series this is the main point I want to focus on this morning. Friends, there is a difference between being a religious person who attends church, puts a few dollars in the offering plate, and maybe even serves on a committee, and being a follower of Jesus who has had a personal

encounter with the risen Lord.

That encounter doesn't necessarily have to be as dramatic as Saul's experience on the road to Damascus. I've heard many people include in their testimony words like: "I didn't really have a 'Damascus road' experience..." That's alright – God doesn't always use the same method to draw us to himself. However, what is consistent is that the Lord meets us in a way that gets our attention, transforms us by the indwelling power of his Holy Spirit, and enables us to live for him.

Some of us can share personal stories of transformational moments in which Jesus changed us. There have been three or four in my life: making a profession of faith in Christ as a third-grader, recommitting my life to Jesus after my first year of college, encountering the Lord in a powerful way on a short-term mission trip to Mexico, and God unfolding his plan for us to move to Dubuque, Iowa for me to attend seminary and become a pastor. I'm not sure that any of those moments would qualify as a Damascus road experience, but there is a story associated with each one in which God altered the course of my life.

How about you? How has Jesus encountered you, personally, and touched your life in ways that have been transformational? I encourage you to reflect on those times of transformation over the next few moments and in the coming days. Whether you've had a Damascus road experience in the past or not, keep alert because the risen Christ is still in the business of meeting us right where we are in the journey of life and turning us in new and unexpected directions. Let's prepare for that possibility as we come to the Lord's Table.