

When I was a young child my mother instilled many valuable lessons into me. The one she reminded me about the most was “knowledge is power.” You see my mother worked for the Richmond Times Dispatch Newspaper as a reporter so she was keenly aware of the power of knowledge and how other people could take it and run with it. As a young woman, living before the world of social media and cell phones, I guarded my secrets carefully. Family secrets, personal secrets, others’ secrets. While I still think that this lesson was an important one to learn and has fared me well as a pastor, our Scripture for today calls us to do something completely different; we are called to share our stories so that others may come to know the living God.

The first sermon I ever preached was on this same Scripture from Acts 9. For some reason I have always related to Saul, not in the sense that I was persecuting others, but in the sense of accepting my calling from God. I ran from my calling for many years and I, like Saul, needed God to confront me so that I could surrender to what God was calling me to do.

First, we have to understand where Saul was coming from. He was doing what he thought was right. He was a pious Jew and he thought Jesus was a false prophet. He thought Jesus’ disciples were taking away from the one true God that he worshiped. The first time we meet Saul in Scripture is at the stoning of Stephen which he orchestrated (Acts 7:58-60). Saul was on a mission to single handedly take out all the disciples of Jesus Christ.

In fact, our in Scripture for today he was on his way to obtain paperwork so that he could help capture and jail more of Jesus’ disciples. This is where he was confronted by the risen Lord: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4).

The interesting thing about Jesus Christ is that even people who did not believe in Him were able to recognize him. In Disciple Bible Study this past week we spent some time studying Mark 5, the story of the healing of a man named Legion. When Legion saw Jesus Christ, he ran up to him and said, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” (Mark 5:7).

Saul’s response is similar he says, “Who are you Lord” (Acts 9:5). Jesus then instructed him to go to the city, where he would be told what to do. In this moment, Saul became blind and needed help getting to the place where God was asking him to go.

What is beautiful about Saul’s call story is that it involved a disciple of Christ, a man named Ananias. God spoke to him in a vision and told him to go and give Saul sight. I would have to imagine that Ananias was not excited about this assignment. He basically said, “Are you sure God?” This man has great authority and is persecuting your people. are you sure I should go and help him? But like a good servant of the Lord he said, “Here I am” (Acts 9:10).

Just as the community of faith helped unbound Lazarus from the literal trappings of death, like we talked about on Easter Sunday, in this Scripture we see that God used Ananias to help free Saul from the trappings of his sins against the people of God. We hear what happens at the end of the Scripture in Acts 9:17-20:

“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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

In this moment of transformation, we are shown the path of discipleship. We encounter Christ, we are baptized and enter into a covenant with God and the community and faith, we spend time in study and worship, and then we are sent out to share the good news of Christ with others.

Paul was a powerful evangelist because he could relate with the Jews he encountered. He could say, “I used to be one of you, I used to not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, but then Jesus confronted me and gave me new sight, and the power of the Holy Spirit!” Our most effective evangelism is when we share our stories with other people including our greatest struggles and our greatest joys.

What is interesting in pop culture at the moment is that there is a new narrative being told. For so long a good leader was considered someone who was a workaholic, someone who would sacrifice themselves for the good of the company, someone who modeled extreme effectively.

This model is changing. Research is showing that people are more responsive to a leader who is vulnerable rather than a leader is strong all the time. This surprised me as I am someone who has prided myself on being a strong leader. But what this research has taught me is that you cannot lead people who cannot relate to you.

In her Ted Talk entitled “The Power of Vulnerability” Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, speaks to this idea. She said, “In order for connection to happen we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen.”ⁱ In order for us to connect to other people we have to be vulnerable.

This is the place where we find Saul, completely vulnerable. He was blind and had to rely on a stranger, Ananias, to help him, but in his vulnerability, this surrender to the call of Jesus Christ, Saul gained new life and a new identity.

Saul, who later in Acts became Paul, has a powerful story because we can relate to it. In his quest of persecution, he was consumed by his cause. We all know what it is like to be consumed by something whether it is worry, shame, anger, unforgiveness, or pride. We know what it is like to be blinded to the love and grace of God, even when God is right beside us.

It is no mistake in Scripture that Saul is blind for three days before he regains his sight. This was the same pattern for Jesus’ resurrection. The disciples waited three days until the light of the world shone again. Saul waited three days to experience a moment of resurrection in his life, a time to die to his sins and be risen with Christ.

This is what the season of Easter is all about, being mindful of the signs of resurrection in our lives. Resurrection is still happening all around us and we can be part of this amazing ministry of Jesus Christ.

We are part of this ministry when we share our stories with other people. We hear this same calling to us in the Old Testament. Psalm 30 calls us to share our faith in God. Verses 11-12 reads: “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.”

In our lives we experience mourning and joy. We go through things in life that are unexpected and difficult and we encounter amazing moments of joy. Much of the things we go through we cannot control, but we do get to decide to use our stories for the glory of God. Our stories are our most effective tools for evangelism.

To share our stories we have to be vulnerable. This is a lesson I was forced to learn in ministry. My third year of ministry at Culpeper UMC, my husband Nelson, had a minor heart attack and I had to miss a Sunday.

What was private family information became public out of necessity and the need for others to pray for Nelson for his healing. This was a hard moment for me. Pastors are supposed to care for other people, not be the one being cared for. And yet, I was blessed to experience the profound love of the community of God. I experienced that again here when Nelson went through his cancer diagnosis and surgery.

These experiences continue to remind me that unless we as pastors can be vulnerable with our congregations, how can we expect our congregations to be vulnerable with us?

The good news for our lives today is that we all have a story to tell, and our stories can help other people experience the love and grace of God.

Brene Brown shares some things for us to consider in our vulnerability:

We must have the courage to be imperfect. None of us are perfect, but so often we try so hard to make other people think that we are. Sometimes we even convince ourselves. We have to remember that it is not in the perfection that we connect with other people it is in the imperfection.

These are the places that Jesus connected with other people. He spent most of his time with people who considered themselves imperfect. Those who felt like they didn’t belong. Those who were ashamed. Those who were ready to give up. Jesus healed people of their infirmities and they did not become perfect, but what they did become was powerful evangelists.

In our quest for vulnerability we have to be kind to ourselves and others. We will experience missed opportunities where we choose not to share our stories, perhaps we are not yet ready or maybe it is not the right time to share. We can’t be hard on ourselves for this. We have to be kind to ourselves and others as we share our stories and hear other people’s stories. This is holy time.

Jesus was kind and compassionate in a world that was filled with apathy. He stopped on the street to heal people who were reaching out to him. He stopped what he was doing to go and raise a child from the dead. Jesus touched those who were considered untouchable and helped bring them back into the community. He stopped to hear people’s stories.

Finally, we are called to fully embrace vulnerability.

Many people thought Jesus Christ came to be a great warrior. As we talked about on Palm Sunday, people were surprised that Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on a lowly donkey. He was not strong in stature, but in his faith in God.

Jesus came to us as a vulnerable infant in order to know what humanity was like so that God could connect with us. Jesus did not travel with an armed guard, but with fisherman and tax collectors. Jesus surrendered his life, making himself completely vulnerable, so that through the power of God, we could have everlasting life.

Then in the power of God, Jesus rose from the dead, so that even we could be forgiven.

Through vulnerability, through Jesus’ complete surrender, we gained eternal life.

Paul is an amazing example of vulnerability in the Bible. In his moment of realization that Jesus Christ was Lord, he said, “He is the Son of God!” (Acts 9:20) This is how Saul lived his life. He made himself completely vulnerable so that others could come to know the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Like Saul, may we not be afraid to tell our stories, may we not be afraid to be vulnerable. Your stories are powerful. Use them for the glory of God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Brene Brown Ted Talk “The Power of Vulnerability.”
https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en

Additional Resources

Sakenfield et al. The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible. Vol. 4. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 2009. P. 414.

The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. X. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. Keck et al. 1995. P. 150-151.