

Damascus Road

Acts 9:1-6

April 18, 2010

I participate in an email listserv with other classmates in the Yale College class of 1975. When you post or reply to an email message, it is sent simultaneously to all the other members of the listserv. Lately, we have enjoyed some lively discussions on health care reform and national tax policy and the new iPad.

One recent thread began with a question about home-brewed beer. That led to a discussion of favorite wines which morphed into a discussion of favorite Jewish wines (a large number of my classmates are Jewish) which in turn morphed into a conversation about kosher wines, which led to a discussion about religious intolerance! To be qualified as kosher, it was pointed out that a wine must be handled by Jewish workers, not by Gentiles (non-Jews). One of my classmates responded to that revelation with this comment:

Once a religion encourages you to treat other people as somehow contaminating you, I don't see how I can respect it. That goes for any religion.

Another classmate replied:

The trouble with this view is that every religion is schizophrenic on this topic. They all advocate generic brotherhood then demonize others in the small print -- or in commentary and sermons.

Ouch! Is it true? Is this a fair evaluation of every religion? Is this a fair evaluation of our religion? When we talk about loving our neighbors, are we just blowing smoke or fooling ourselves or being downright hypocritical?

There is no lack of historical evidence to suggest he is right. In our own day, we have seen the rise of Islamic terrorism, violent action taken in the name of God, and Christian terrorism, too. The crusades pitted Moslem armies on one side against Christian armies on the other, sent to stop their advance. The leaders of Nazi Germany oppressed and murdered Jews and gypsies and gays, in the name of God and with the complicity of the church.

The birth of our own nation is marked by our shameful treatment of American aboriginals, as immigrants with a perceived religious mandate pushed the natives out of their way, treating them as less than human.

There has been much violence between Hindus and Muslims in India, much violence between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, and much of violent racism in South Africa and the United States.

Religion has encouraged the spread of violence in other subtler forms, too. Christians have done cultural violence in the name of spreading the faith, suppressing traditional languages and customs and music and art. And we have done social violence, criticizing, patronizing, ostracizing, demonizing other people for having no faith or having a different faith.

History does not often tell a flattering story of people of faith, including people of the Christian faith. It is especially baffling and appalling to me that our religion, the religion of Jesus, centered on the one who said "Judge not!" can be so judgmental; that our religion, centered on the one who was so welcoming, can be so unwelcoming; that our religion, centered on the one who gave himself up to save us from hell, can so easily consign other people to hell!

I don't get it! What's going on? Are we just bad Christians? Or is our faith itself flawed? Does being particular and passionate about what you believe necessarily lead to hostility and intolerance directed at those who believe differently? Is the gospel of love a lie?

Let me tell you about Saul, Saul of Tarsus. You probably know him as Paul, a missionary and a church planter and the author of half the books we know collectively as our New Testament.

Saul of Tarsus was a Jew, and a Pharisee ... and a jihadist! I am using that word, borrowed from another faith, to refer to a person who takes up the sword in the name of religion, in the name of God. Saul was an agent of the religious establishment, sent with letters of introduction and their endorsement, to do their dirty work. He was doing his best, by threat and intimidation, by the power of arrest and prosecution, and even by murder, to eradicate this new religious movement called "the Way of the Lord," centered around the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Saul was a jihadist, a man prepared to do whatever it takes to defend the honor of his religion against its supposed enemies, a man prepared to do violence in the name of God. He had already stood by, approving, as his colleagues stoned to death Stephen, a leader of the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, and he was more than prepared to go that far again.

Saul was on his way to Damascus, following with purpose and determination the road to Damascus, just as months before, Jesus had followed with purpose

and determination the road to Jerusalem. But the purpose and intentions of these two travelers could not be more different!

Saul went to Damascus because he wanted to go. Jesus went to Jerusalem because God wanted him to go.

Saul went to take, to search out any followers of Jesus, men and women, to arrest them. Jesus went to give, to offer himself on behalf of anybody, everybody, men and women and children.

Saul went to put people at his mercy, to bring them back to Jerusalem by force, to be tried and judged and punished. Jesus went to put himself at their mercy, the mercy of the people, to be tried and judged and punished himself, by them.

Jesus went to Jerusalem with sacrificial intent. Saul went to Damascus with murderous intent. But something happened along the way, something happened to Saul on the Damascus Road. On the way, at a place in the road near the city, a bright light flashed from the sky and Saul heard a voice:

Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?

And, from that moment, Saul's life was never again the same! The persecutor became an apostle. Jesus' antagonist became his witness. The scourge of the followers of the Way of the Lord became their staunchest defender.

On the Damascus Road, Saul met Jesus, in person, face-to-face, and it changed him forever. It's like Job said, after his encounter with the Lord, when the Lord spoke to him out of the storm:

In the past I knew only what others had told me, but now I have seen you with my own eyes ...

Genuine faith is personal, never second-hand. It's not knowing about Jesus, but knowing Jesus that changes us!

Saul was changed. He was still headstrong, still zealous, still ambitious, still passionate about his faith, still intelligent and assertive, still determined, still a doer, but his way -- his way of being, his way of doing -- was entirely new. His way was now Jesus' way, the Way of the Lord. He still traveled far and wide, for the honor of his God, seeking people out, but now to persuade, not to coerce, now to bring good news, not bad, now not causing suffering in the name of the Lord, but enduring suffering in the name of Jesus.

Jesus met him and showed him a new way, the way, the way of the Lord, the way of love. Tell me. Who said, "The greatest of these is love"? Saul did! Saul did because he learned from Jesus, the one who told his followers there was nothing more important than loving God with all your heart and mind and strength and loving your neighbor as you love yourself. Who said, "Love your enemy"? Jesus did. And Saul did, in Romans 12!

The religion of Jesus -- when we know Jesus! -- does not lead to hostility and intolerance, but love. Love that does not judge, but forgives. Love that does not push away, but welcomes. Love that does not put down, but lifts up. Love that does not coerce, but serves. Love that proves itself, not by what it believes, but by what it does. How will they know you are a follower of Jesus? By your love!

Love looks at every person, and sees ... a child of God, a daughter of God, a son of God! Love looks at every person and sees ... Jesus!

That's what Saul was missing! That's what Saul didn't see! Remember what Jesus said to him: "Why do you persecute me?" Not, "Why do you persecute my followers?" but, "Why do you persecute me?"

And remember what Jesus said to his followers just before he died.

Whenever you feed a hungry person or clothe a naked person or visit a sick person or welcome a stranger, you do it for me! And whenever you refuse to help one of these little ones, you refuse to help me!

That's the key. That is what makes the difference. That is what makes us different -- when we do not charge into the world with the strength of Jesus behind us, but when we charge into the world with the face of Jesus ahead of us!

What would it mean, in every human encounter, if you saw, in every human face, the face of Christ? Would you make fun of Christ? Would you call Christ an ass? Would you scream "baby-killer" at Christ? Would you call Christ a racist pig? Would you ignore Christ if he were suffering? Would you tune Christ out if he called to you for help?

I want you to picture in your mind, right now, the last person to irritate you, the last person to get on your nerves, the last person to tick you off. Picture his face. See her face.

But look! It's changing! Let it happen! Let it change! Let it become, in your mind's eye, let it become -- for real! -- the face of Jesus!

One more thing. One more thing before we're finished. There is something about this story, the story of Saul on the Damascus Road, that puzzles me.

Why did it happen there? Why did Jesus meet Saul a few miles from Damascus and not somewhere else? Why not at the road's beginning, just outside Jerusalem, instead of at its end?

And why did it happen then? Why did Jesus wait to meet Saul until after Saul had already done so much harm to his followers? Why not days before or even months before? Maybe if he had met Saul sooner, Saul might have protested Stephen's murder or even prevented it.

But it is what it is. Anything that is real happens at a particular time. Anything that is real happens in a particular place. We can always ask: Why there? Why then? But it's kind of like asking: Why is the red rose not pink? Why do dogs bark and cats don't?

It is what it is. It happened there. It happened then. What matters is not where it happened or when it happened, but that it happened! Jesus met Saul. Jesus met Saul on the Damascus Road and changed his life.

And Jesus will meet you. I can't tell you where. I can't tell you when. But I can tell you he will!