



**To Change the World (One Person at a Time)**

**Acts 9:1-6**

**April 14, 2013**

Our scripture passage today, in a way, is about violence. We have encountered a lot of violence these past few years through mass shootings. The mass shootings of children in a grade school. The mass shootings of people in a theatre. The shootings of students on college campuses. The shootings seem to increase, and we wonder how to stop it. How do we reach these individuals who feel the need to murder people in mass quantities?

I read an article in a newspaper after the Virginia Tech shootings. It said that everything is random because the world was created from a violent random explosion. "There is no ultimate protection from things that happen without reason. The Virginia Tech shootings were as random as the wind. At the base of all life are constant collisions of molecules. Things happen because they do. And life is a random thing." The author then uses a very depressing word...."unfixable."

I beg to differ.

Several years ago, I watched the movie "Bobby" – about the night Robert Kennedy was assassinated on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1968. I remember that day as probably many of you do...waking up that morning to hear the news. The end of the movie has the assassination. As people are trying to comprehend what happened, the words of Bobby Kennedy are heard: "Mindless violence in America stains our land...We seemingly tolerate a rising of violence...We need a cleansing of our whole society to remove this sickness from our souls...we cannot banish it with a program."

Our scripture passage this morning shows us how this sickness can be removed from our souls. The Acts passage is about a young man with violent tendencies, a man full of hate and revenge who acted on those violent feelings. I invite you to turn with me to Acts 9.

As we prepare to hear these words, let us pray.....

Holy God, as we open your Word, we lay aside all that hinders us from listening to your voice. We ask that you grant us grace to hear, wisdom to understand and courage to apply what we learn. Amen.

Before we read, let me give you a bit of background to our scripture passage. A new, young Christian man named Stephen has been murdered, stoned to death because of his faith in Jesus. Here is what happens:

From Acts 8:1-3

“And Saul approved of their killing [Stephen]. That day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”

And now we begin our scripture passage: Read Acts 9:1-6

Saul, or Paul as he was later known, described himself in a letter this way (1 Timothy 1:13): “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.”

From a commentary on what this word for “man of violence” means in Greek: “indicates a kind of arrogant sadism; it describes the man who is out to inflict pain for the sheer joy of inflicting it. He finds delight in his own cruelty and in the suffering of the other person.”

Sounds like the description of a mass murderer.

Many people would have looked at Paul, saw a man of violence and said he could not change. Yet, he did. Jesus literally knocked him off his horse and said, “Follow me.”

Let’s take a closer look at this change in Paul. The description of Paul is almost exclusively in terms of his violence: breathing murderous threats, dragging Christians from their homes and throwing them into prison, approving of the murder of Stephen. Thus, it is his violence that Jesus addresses when he speaks: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

Saul does not immediately recognize who it is (he never met Jesus in person). So Jesus identifies himself and once again addresses the issue of violence. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

What a shock these words must have been to Paul, who up to this point, seems to have prided himself for his faithfulness to Judaism! Up till now, Jesus was the

sinner, and Paul was the saint. Now that Jesus has identified himself, Paul recognizes that he is the sinner. In fact, as Paul would later write, I was “chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15). Throughout his life and ministry Paul marveled at the grace of God shown to him, a violent man.

And what’s so amazing about Paul (who became one the most famous missionaries of all time and wrote much of what we call the New Testament) is that the same energy and zeal that went into persecuting the Christians, Paul used to follow Jesus. He writes: Christ “judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence” (I Timothy 1:12-13)

The violence of Paul was transformed into a call.

Christ entered into the heart, soul and mind of a violent man, called him to be a follower of Christ, and it changed Paul’s life forever. Paul’s encounter with Christ was not only a conversion it was also a call to a specific ministry. And that ministry changed the world.

There are many ways to change the world. One way is through politics, changing laws. That’s how William Wilberforce abolished slavery in England. Right now, the government is discussing policies for gun control. Families from Newtown are in Washington D.C. sharing their story in hopes that laws will be changed.

Another way to change the world is through social activism. Find the trouble spots and help in some way. Earth Day is April 22: saving the earth as the planet continues to heat up. Many people participate in runs and walks to raise awareness and money for such causes as cancer. There are many more fine examples.

But I believe there is another way to change the world. It is not mutually exclusive from social activism and working through politics, but it is a good place to start - by changing the hearts, souls and minds of people one at a time through Christ...just as Jesus changed the heart, mind and soul of Paul.

In the Gospels, Jesus said to his disciples, “Follow me.” These words were the first words the disciples heard from Jesus when they first met him. “Follow me” was one of the last words the disciples heard from Jesus as he left this earth. Jesus entered into their hearts, souls and minds, and as these men followed Jesus and introduced people to Christ, the world was changed.

“Follow me,” Jesus says, and I will change your life. And changed lives result in changed families, changed neighborhoods, changed societies.

For example, let me give you some facts about how Christianity has changed the world because people’s lives were changed by Christ. Christianity elevated

women by rejecting polygamy and prostitution, and protecting the family and children. Christian hospitals were the world's first voluntary charitable institutions. Care for the mentally ill was a Christian initiative. Nursing sprang from Christian concerns for the sick. Christianity established some of the first libraries and educational institutions. The rise of the modern university is largely the result of Christian educational endeavors. These are some of the ways followers of Christ changed the world.

Napoleon, recognizing Jesus' impact on the world, said this about Jesus: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded his empire upon love; and at this hour, millions would die for him. I search history in vain to find similar to Jesus Christ, or anything which can approach the gospel. Neither history nor humanity, nor ages, nor nature, offer me anything with which I am able to compare it or to explain it. Here everything is extraordinary."

So as we look on our world, as we ask what we can do to make the world a better place, as followers of Jesus you need to know that our work here is good. A kind word, a phone call, an encouraging letter, some godly advice, cash given to a good cause, work in the community, tutoring a child, a prayer offered up in faith, whatever it is, it is sharing the love of God through Christ through word and deed. And pray. Pray for the troubled and violent of our society. Certainly pray for the new young leader in North Korea who threatens our world with missiles and nuclear devices.

And one last thought. Paul's conversion wasn't isolated. I encourage you to go home and read the rest of Acts 9. God calls other Christians to come and surround Paul (that is, once they got over their shock!) to help him in his new found faith. It took a community.

God changes the hearts, minds and souls of people all around us, and uses our prayers and our work to change the world – one person at a time. There is hope. Amen.