

Though we get a long explanation of who Saul is in this chapter, We are introduced to Saul a little while earlier in chapter 7. There he is standing guard over some coats while Stephen, an apostle, is being murdered—stoned—killed for what he said. By those who consider themselves “upstanding and good and holy” religious people.

Showing us just how religion, religious systems, believing “the right thing”, leadership doesn’t always keep us from committing evil. We know this to be true today as well. Evil and corruption know no boundaries.

Saul takes a turn and in our passage for today says he starts breathing out murderous threats against Jesus’ disciples.

He gets the permission from the high priest (the highest level of religious authority) to go and drag people from this religion into the prisons—not only him, but all those in the synagogues too. He’s out to exterminate this religion. We read Paul now and don’t often think of

him as a persecutor and

man on the hunt for humans. But that is what he was. The modern-day equivalent might be: someone who goes into another church and bombs them, or ransacks someone’s home pulling them out by force and locking them up. This happens still.

Saul is a legitimate enemy. Murderous. Someone to fear. Doing horribly unjust things. A man whose passion for the “right thing” went very wrong. We must name what he is doing as wrong.

And on the road. A bright light shines and Jesus speaks

to Saul: Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute *me*!?

This line is a bit shocking. Is Jesus really the one being persecuted? Isn't it just those following Jesus?

But here in this moment. Jesus is identifying with those who are being persecuted.

This isn't about nationalism—that Saul is killing Jesus' people but Jesus is identifying with those who are oppressed.

We see this all over Jesus' life—He goes to be with the ones who are being oppressed by the religious system, considered outsiders in it.

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The most clear moment of solidarity and identification with humans who are oppressed is when Jesus dies a death of a criminal, someone tried unjustly, death because he stood up against oppression and tried to uproot it. He died the death of someone hunted down with religious folk approving.

Jesus came to declare: this kind of oppression is not good, holy, right or God-ordained. In fact, it is to END.

This line, declares the same teaching Jesus had spoken of before he had died in the parable in Matthew 25: whatever you do to the least of these you do to me, for me.

We take comfort in this because it means in every place where oppression and persecution and violence against others is happening, Jesus is standing in solidarity,

identifying. And is calling for this to end.

It might be hard to know what this means at times—why does oppression and violence against people with little power still happen? That's a real question. But the thing we find in scripture, is that is where we find Jesus. And many in the global south and African American Christians have found comfort in this reality.

Saul is blinded by this encounter with Jesus and is led by the hand to Damascus. Doesn't eat or drink for three days.

I wonder if he was afraid that the very ones he was out to hunt would come and get him.

Ananias hears from Jesus and Says: Go. Heal and Baptize Saul of Tarsus. And he goes and does just that.

Saul goes from blindness to sight. From a murderous man who is evil and relishing it, to a baptized and filled with the Spirit man. From trying to exterminate those who followed Jesus to spreading it everywhere.

So many people love this story. It's dramatic and reveals a big about face—huge change. Here, we see the one doing evil finding grace, healing, transformation and a new chance at life.

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Growing up I was told this was what happened when grace happened. Went from bad to good. Sinful to holy.

In an instant—like instant noodles or those capsules you can buy that turn into dinosaurs.

But we know that transformation and coming to know God and growing into holiness and following the way of Christ looks more like a babushka doll, an unfurling, a life-long process, a tulip bulb which grows and then dies for a bit and grows more.

Even Paul later says: I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I don't want to do I keep on doing. (Rom 7:15-20)

But this story isn't being told to show us what the model is for transformation or to be seen as the standard we should measure our life by. The drama of the story helps deepen our imaginations....to help us imagine and show us there is grace, transformation and new life for everyone.

Even for the enemy.

God never leaves the one doing harm and evil as a "lost cause". We always say those who are doing evil are not outside the grace and resurrecting power and new life available for us through Christ.

This is the message of the cross—that the enemies are brought near and that violence isn't the way we respond as we so often are taught—punching the one who punched us for instance, but that welcome there is hope always, grace always, acceptance available.

There is healing and grace available for the persecutor, the enemy, the abuser, the oppressor, the one whose passion led them in the wrong direction.

We always hold to this hope and possibility for our enemies. Even as it's hard to know what to do with that.

Which means, that this grace is available for even us.

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Though many of us have not done the kinds of evil Saul has, we've all been confronted with our own ability to do harm, to hurt, to leave things undone and remain silent so that others will be hurt. We know how we can do things we're ashamed of or feel horrible about, how we live with secrets we hope the community doesn't find out about.

This story comes and says if there is grace, a new chance at life, acceptance from Jesus, a new purpose for someone like Saul, perhaps it's possible for us too!

God's grace comes to remind us: We are not just people who have done wrong by what we've done or left undone, who've hurt others, who need to carry shame. We are never just that. We are accepted, forgiven, welcome and brought near. There is grace for us, we're brought near, and asked to repent and

follow the way of Christ again. Transformation is God's work, all we need to do is receive grace. We participate with God in this transformation, but it is God's work.

The story continues with Ananias.

God says: Go find the man from Tarsus. He's had a vision of you healing him.

Ananias is rightly concerned:

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." Ananias isn't the only one concerned, there's also the people in Damascus:

"Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" And the disciples in Jerusalem who have to be reassured by Barnabas that including Saul is ok, that he's not gone undercover, a mole in their group.

People are tentative and nervous and afraid for good reasons.

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They need assurance the change is genuine, though it's probably hard to be certain it is.

And yet. This is where I'm floored. They bring him in, they bring him near.

Ananias goes to him, calls him brother and in so doing declares that THIS man! THIS man who hunted them down, who persecuted them is part of the family! He's so much part of the family that the apostles invite him in, the followers in Damascus invite him in. And when he is about to be killed by the Jewish people he used to be part of, they hide him and send him away.

This is harder to stomach than the reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon.

Not just the persecuted ones have Jesus identifying with them, but those who did evil also have Jesus inviting them in to experience grace.

And now it has to be worked out in the community.

Do we and how do we create space for the one who did injustice, who did evil, who was passionate in the wrong direction? For someone with this kind of reputation and action to back that up.

But the enemy is brought near through the welcome Jesus gave him and the community enfolds him.

We ask similar questions and have the same kinds of well-founded reservations at times.

Can THAT person change? Could God really include THEM? Forgive THEM? Touch THEM with Christ's resurrection life?

When we look around the community we've wrestled with these questions.

Sometimes our questions turn to judgments and we declare it isn't possible and leave them outside the

community fold. And maybe even some of you know that pain. Sorry. Yet here, Ananias and the disciples hold to the possibility of change. And *also* hold space for this man to join their family as Christ has welcomed him, they welcome him.

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They show us the way of the church. The way of the people of God that is admirable and oh so hard.

Brennan Manning in the *Ragamuffin gospel* says it like this:

(15)“Something is radically wrong when the local church rejects a person accepted by Jesus...Jesus comes to the ungodly, even on Sunday morning. His coming ends ungodliness and makes us worthy....Jesus sat down at table with anyone who wanted to be present, including those who were banished from decent homes. In the sharing of a meal they received consideration instead of the expected condemnation. A merciful acquittal instead of a hasty verdict of guilty. Amazing grace instead of universal disgrace. Here is a very practical demonstration of the law of grace—a new chance in life. Any church that will not accept that it consists of sinful men and women, and exists for them, implicitly rejects the gospel of grace...”

Perhaps the apostles welcome him because they know there's grace for Paul, just as there had been grace, forgiveness and transformation for them when they

abandoned Jesus, messed up.

That's the secret isn't it. If we've known God's welcome, forgiveness and grace, we know we're all swimming in the same river of grace and all in need of drinking from that river.

Obviously when we open up space for people who have done wrong, or done evil to us in community, there are boundaries and safety that must be in place. But as a community, we do need to wrestle with what it means that if Jesus has called, changed, transformed someone and there is the possibility that it can happen, how do we welcome those who are our ex- enemies?

We say and hold to God's grace is abundant. And there can be healing, change, grace and welcome for: The abused and the abuser. The persecuted and the persecutor.

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The oppressed and the oppressor. The murdered and the murderer.

I'd be lying if I didn't say that I don't know always what to do with this. Nor is any story adequate as an example for when someone truly hurts us, hunts us down, traumatizes us there is truly deep work we need to do and the other person needs to do before this action can take place. Safety and boundaries. Genuine change. Justice and holding people accountable for the evil they've done.

And yet, we also wrestle with the truth of this story and the example of Jesus loving his enemies. We wrestle of the way though evil has no boundaries. Neither does grace.

I'm guessing all these reflections open up more questions for you. This is not nice and neat. So, spend some time truly reflecting on it yourself. Ask questions, chat with friends.

But know, no matter where you find yourself—there's grace enough for you! God desires to bring you healing and transformation. All we need to do is remain open to the work of Christ.