

The Right Tool For The Job

Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing 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.

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 do you persecute 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.”

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.

Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias.

The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.”

He answered, “Here I am, Lord.”

The Lord said to him,

“Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas

look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.

At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

But Ananias answered,

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

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.”

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May 1, 2022

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I.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of today's scripture reading from Acts chapter 9, the importance and significance of which would be impossible to overstate, I would like to first make a point about the distinction between where we end up and how we might get there.

Every week you do me the great honor of offering your attention to hear or read my words, and then contemplate the perspective I offer on whatever scriptural text is being examined and considered. Please know, I take such a privilege and such a responsibility with the utmost seriousness, and with no small amount of gratitude. Seriousness concerning the importance of the scriptural lesson being taught and the theological implications being brought to bear, and gratitude for the leeway you extend for the particular and often meandering path I ask you to travel in order to arrive at them.

II.

However, the real significance of the matter is that whatever truth is revealed during our weekly, shared homiletical exercise is owed much more to what *you* bring to the experience than anything *I* might to have to offer. While it is the case that I have certain obligations for the scholarly and exegetical analysis of the text (like authorship, date, cultural considerations and historical background) when it comes to connecting the possible meaning of a text to the real world in which we live I am, at best, a three-trick-pony.

Like every other preacher, the degree of variety and insight I might bring to bear on scripture is limited to my own experiences, education and perspectives. Which, as I noted in the Pastor's Report for the May newsletter, is something which is greatly worrisome to me. As I fear *my* necessarily limited ability to frame the world will, eventually, fall short of *your* ever-growing need to understand it.

III.

Today's sermon is a case in point. When I read the story of the Apostle Paul, then named Saul, and his conversion experience on the road to Damascus fresh from having overseen the execution of Stephen (the first Christian martyr) all I could think about was God choosing the right tool for the job. Of late, and for the past few years, much of my free time has been spent using various tools to build the She Shack. Consequently, it is little wonder that the metaphor of "the tool" has become one of the main tricks this particular pony has at his disposal. Recent weeks have seen me make use of an incredible array of tools: skill saw, hand saw, table saw, chop saw, chisel, drills, files, rasp, tape measure, pliers, speed square, sander, wire stripper, framing nailer, air stapler, ladder, levels, knee pads, clamps, bit extenders, ear protector, three kinds of screw drivers and my newest and most favorite tool, a right angle attachment for my drill.

IV.

Most often, a particular tool helps the user accomplish a task more easily, more efficiently, or more effectively. Then there are certain specialized tools which allow the user to accomplish a task which would otherwise be impossible to do. This past Christmas, one of the presents Santa brought me was the aforementioned right angle attachment. Though I couldn't necessarily recall a time or a job when I could have used such a tool, I added it to my Christmas wish list with the expectation that some day it would be exactly the right tool for the job.

Typically, when screwing or making a hole, one needs to be pointing the drill directly at the screw to be inserted or the place where the hole is to be drilled. In almost every instance this is quite possible, and easily done. Occasionally, though, an unusually difficult task presents itself where every other tool in one's tool kit, whether you have 10 tools or 110, simply won't get the job done; instead, there is that one right tool for the job.

V.

Such was the case these last few weeks while working on the She Shack. The first step in wiring a building is identifying where you want your outlets, switches and fixtures to be, then screwing or nailing junction boxes to the wall studs or ceiling rafters at those specific locations. The next step is to run wire

from the panel, or breaker box, to each successive box; ideally, in some efficient and logical manner.

However, this almost always requires drilling a hole in each wall stud so the wire can pass through and link the electricity from box to box. Typically, wall studs are laid out 16 inches on center so there is plenty of room to drill the necessary 3/4 inch hole in the middle of the stud through which the wire will need to go. Occasionally, though, you get a much smaller width between studs; usually due to the placement of a door or window, which requires extra studs. In those instances, the drill and the bit simply will not fit, so you need a right angle attachment which allows you to hold the drill perpendicular to the stud.



VI.

This, then, is an excellent example of an impossible task only made possible by virtue of having the right tool for the job. Similarly, today's scripture reading is an excellent example of God choosing the right tool for the job, namely Saul of Tarsus, so as to make possible the seemingly and otherwise impossible task of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ beyond the limits of a very small group based in Jerusalem; and, eventually to every known corner of the wider world.

That we are sitting here today in this church is proof of just how effective was the Apostle Paul at getting the job done. A Pharisee and scourge upon the early church who brutally persecuted believers with an unmatched zeal, Saul was an odd pick and a difficult choice, to be sure. We can only imagine the trepidation of Ananias, another right tool for the job, at being called to seek out a man of such turpitude in order to pray and lay hands upon him, opening his eyes to see the future God had in store for the Apostle Paul.

VII.

Speaking of Paul's apostleship, when examining the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus, it is important to note that while his companions *heard* the voice speaking to Paul, asking him why he was persecuting him, Paul actually *saw* the risen Lord who was speaking to him. This would soon become an important point of validation as to Paul's authority in the early

church. While there were countless *followers* of Christ (or “the Way”) and many *disciples* who had supported his earthly ministry and the work of the nascent church, the title of *Apostle* was reserved for those few who had actually *seen* the rise Lord.

Hearing the Lord, or hearing *about* the Lord, is one thing; and an important thing, to be sure. However, actually *seeing* the Lord moves one across and past a threshold of greatest consequence. And it is this very same threshold that you and I are invited to cross each and every Sunday, and in every moment of our lives.

VIII.

Some years ago, when my son Tucker was in high school, he was involved in the production of the various plays and musicals put on by the students; eventually occupying the role of Stage Manager. I remember he once educated me about a concept I found quite fascinating: what is known as “the Fourth Wall.” That is, the imaginary barrier that exists between a television program, film, or play and separates the story from the real world of its audience. On rare occasion, actors and players will “break” the Fourth Wall by acknowledging or, even, addressing the audience; usually for comedic effect or as an avant-garde technique. While it is perhaps not the case with most pastors and preachers, it is my intent, each and every Sunday, to use the sermon to break the Fourth Wall.

IX.

Over the years, I have come to conclude that most people, even most church people, *hear* the voice of the Risen Christ; or, more correctly stated, *only* hear the Lord’s voice. The particular type of tool which is forged from such a faith is one that helps the user accomplish the tasks of life more easily, more efficiently, or more effectively. However, when we actually *see* the Risen Christ alive and at work in the world the faith we receive is a tool is one which allows us to accomplish with our life are tasks which, otherwise, would be simply impossible to do. While it is true that we seldom see the Risen Christ in such an immediate and dramatic moment as did the Apostle Paul we, nevertheless, catch enough glimpses to eventually be able to piece together a full and convincing image of Christ alive and at work in the world...through the *church*.

X.

Whereas Paul was certainly the right tool for the particular job God had in mind for the church at that specific time and place, God is always subcontracting other jobs in every age and to each part of the globe; even here in the North Country and, especially, here in *this* church. When we, as a congregation, push through that Fourth Wall we cease to be merely *observers* of God's unfolding drama and, instead, become *participants* in the story. When we, as a congregation move beyond simply *hearing* the voice of God and actually start *seeing* the one who is speaking, the resulting faith transforms us into the kind of specialized tool which allows God, through us, to accomplish a task (or tasks) which would otherwise be impossible to do.

There is the catch, though. Such specialized tools are only good for one particular set of circumstances. As any of the numerous handy people in our own congregation will tell you, when it come to getting the *entire* job done a *great* many specialized tools will be needed.

XI.

Which is where *you* come in; *each* of you and *all* of us together. As is the case with any home where you need a basic tool kit for those occasional small jobs the homeowner needs to do just to keep the house in working order, so, too, is it the case with any church. However, whereas the home owner can hire a person to address larger jobs they may not have the tools or skills to accomplish on their own, the church can only rely on the abilities, or tools, within its own congregation. We cannot hire someone to do the larger jobs of the church; we need to figure out how to do them for ourselves and, when needed, develop the kind of specialized tools within the congregation which allows it to do what would otherwise be impossible; this is what makes for the distinction between where we end up and how we might get there.

XII.

Which is why I began today's sermon by saying that what we have together as a church is owed much more to what *you* bring to the experience than anything *I* might to have to offer. Yes, I have my role to play, my job to do. I believe with all my heart that through this congregation I have seen the Risen Christ alive and at work in our world, because I see it in all of you every day,

and I am forever grateful for the kind of profound faith which comes as a gift from witnessing such a vision; like scales falling from my eyes.

The determining factor, though, in the kind of work we as church might do is wholly dependent on such scales falling from your eyes as well; that *each* of you will not only *hear* about the Risen Christ, but actually *see* the Risen Christ with *the right angle* and, in so doing, break through that Fourth Wall from observer to participant, and become the right tool for the job God has in mind for our future here on the Park. Amen.