

An Unlikely Friendship

Part 2 of Sermon Series:
Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God

a sermon based on

Acts 9:1-20

and delivered on

May 5, 2019

3rd Sunday of Easter (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2019 Rev. Mark A Harkness

I've been scolded before for talking about the Chicago Cubs in a sermon. So, although I'm making a baseball reference, I'll try to refrain from mentioning that the Cubs beat the Cardinals twice in the past two days. How many of you watch baseball? Or have watched it? Would it be safe to assume that most of you here are familiar with the rules?

What is rule 4.06 (3.09)? Anybody? Nobody?

Rule 4.06 (3.09) No Fraternization states:

"Players in uniform shall not address or mingle with spectators, nor sit in the stands before, during, or after a game. No manager, coach or player shall address any spectator before or during a game. Players of opposing teams shall not fraternize at any time while in uniform."¹

Let me go over that last line again: "Players of opposing teams shall not fraternize at any time while in uniform." If you've watched a baseball game, that has got to be one of the most ignored rules in professional baseball. How often do we see the runner on first base laughing with the first baseman? And players routinely talk to the fans. A woman whom I knew who had season tickets told me how she used to talk with Sammy Sosa during lulls in play.

Of course talking to the fans is just good public relations. But what about fraternizing with the opposition? Fraternizing with the enemy? Does it matter that when, Cardinal player ,Derrick Fowler, ended up on first base covered by Cubs player, Anthony Rizzo, that they were teammates when the Cubs won the 2016 World Series? (Oops there I go.)

But according to the rules, they can't be friends; they can't even talk to each other while they're in those uniforms. But like I said earlier, that rule gets ignored quite frequently. Doesn't it? At least it does in baseball. Not so much in the rest of the world.

Maybe that's why the unlikely friendship that developed between Ron Hall and Denver Moore is so surprising. Living on the streets of Fort Worth, Texas, Denver was a homeless African American man. He'd done time for attempted armed robbery. Ron, on the other hand, had been a bond trader before becoming an art dealer. Instead of the streets, he lived in the suburbs with his wife and two kids.

They only met because Ron and his wife, Deborah, volunteered at the mission where Denver had gone to stay. But this friendship which began as a friendship between the haves and have not, soon became a friendship of equals when Deborah was diagnosed with liver cancer and Denver became her most ardent prayer warrior. After she died, Ron and Denver friendship developed even further, until they were almost like brothers.²

How does that happen? These aren't people that are supposed to hang out with one another.

Sort of like what happened in that passage in Act today. Saul seeks out Ananias in Damascus. Now Saul was on his way to Damascus in the first place to arrest Christians. This wasn't to give them a ticket. Saul had just left Jerusalem where he'd participated in the stoning of St. Stephen – the first martyr of the Church. But Saul saw the light! Literally. But it blinded him.

So God tells Ananias "Saul is on his way to see you. You need to bless him."

"What?" I almost get the feeling that Ananias wants to say, "I know that you are God, but... Have you lost your mind? You know about this man."

But God tells him, "(H)e is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." (Acts 9:15)

That's big. Ananias listens. But why? The obvious answer is because God is the one who told him so; but lets' think about that for a moment.

God told him, so he listened. That sounds reasonable. But for Ananias to be willing to risk welcoming Saul and offering him the blessing of restoring his sight, Ananias had to be pretty sure that it was God who was talking to him. He was because he was serious about his faith. He was probably pretty devoted to prayer, and he was willing to do whatever God asked him.

Scripture doesn't tell us that Saul and Ananias became friends (at least not directly) but it does say that Saul stayed with the disciples in Damascus for several days, where he began to proclaim Jesus! (Acts 9:20) I think a friendship was born. Don't you.

But it isn't the sort of friendship that should happen. Remember Ananias was a disciple – a Christian; Saul had been hunting down Christians. That's why he was on his way to meet the likes of Ananias in the first place. How easy would it have been for Ananias to refuse to meet or bless or host Saul? Who could have blamed him?

Although it's nothing new, it seems like that sort of attitude has become more pronounced in our world, in our country, and in almost all of our relationships. I can't like you because you're a Democrat, or you're a Republican; you voted for Hillary, or you voted for Trump; or you support same-sex marriage, or you don't; or you're a degenerate Cardinals fan and I bleed Cubbie blue.

My brother and I actually had fist fights watching Cub/Cardinal games on TV when we were kids. But we were kids. We were brothers and we found lots of reasons to fight. Ultimately it didn't change that we are brothers.

There are so many reasons we as people can choose to divide ourselves. But for those of us who would be called disciples of Jesus Christ, we need to rethink that.

Jesus – the Word made flesh – came not only to live among us, but to live as one of us to bring us into atonement – AT ONE MENT – with God and with all those who are made in his image. He invites us to look beyond our differences or the reasons why we shouldn't like each other.

My Papaw served in Europe during World War II. His next door neighbor, Fritz, did the same, except that Fritz served in the Austrian army having been drafted after Hitler annexed Austria. But they were good neighbors. Except that both had been captured by the Russians, there was no reason that these two “enemies” should become friends. But they happened to live next to each other which presented a choice.

In a few moments, we are about to share in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. It's the same body and blood that others are sharing in other churches whether they be United Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic or even Southern Baptist. It's the same cup of salvation whether it's held by a progressive Christian or a fundamentalist. We are called to be one body of Jesus Christ.

But there's a reason we do it, and it's not just for ourselves, the *epiclesis* the actual words of consecration – “Pour out your Holy Spirit on these gifts of bread and wine so that they might be for us the body and blood of Jesus Christ (and here's what I want you to hear) so that we might be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood.”

The good news is that God surprises us with unlikely friendships, like he did with Denver and Rob, and Saul and Ananias. When we trust him, he can bring new friendships into our lives; friendships we might not have even imagined. There is no rule 4.06(3.09) for Christians. There is no rule which tells us with whom we are not allowed to fraternize; but instead a command that Christ gave us to love one another and to love our neighbor (even if he's an enemy) as ourselves. AMEN.

¹ <https://baseballrulesacademy.com/user/official-rules/mlb/4-06-3-09-no-fraternization/>

² Story told in *Some Kind of Different as Me* by Ron Hall and Denver Moore (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008) found in *A Preachers Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016) 207.