

RECOGNIZING JESUS

Sermon, April 18, 2010

Texts: Revelation 5:11-14; Acts 9:1-20

In preparing this week's bulletin, two memories came to mind while reading through the lectionary reading from Revelation 5:11-14, which we used as our Call to Worship. The first memory was from a conference years ago; the speaker was giving a presentation on the Lord's Prayer and made a profound point that really stuck with me. He pointed out that two profound theological truths of God's immanence and God's transcendence are proclaimed in the opening address of the prayer: "Our Father ... " ... this speaks of God's "immanence" or His "nearness." Basically, in this form of intimate address Jesus calls us to recognize God's nearness as One who is intimately involved with His children, nearer to us than an even an earthly father. "...Who art in Heaven." This speaks of God's transcendence; Jesus also calls us to recognize God is in heaven. Though He is our intimate Father, He is also the One who is at the center of all this fuss and ado in this heavenly drama portrayed so vividly in Revelation. "Thousands upon thousands of angels, numbering ten thousand times ten thousand," living creatures, elders, "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea", all encircling the throne and focusing their adoration and praise and worship toward the One Who is seated there ... well, that's our Dad! Each and every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we are called to recognize this somewhat paradoxical, but profoundly glorious truth from the get go.

The second memory is much more recent, also connoting this idea of "immanence" and "transcendence." Most of you know I traveled to my hometown April 6 to attend an old teammate/classmate's induction into our high school Hall of Fame. I've known Lt. General David Rodriguez since we were seventh graders; he was a defensive end and I a defensive tackle for our high school team. He had served until this past October as General McChrystal's deputy general in command of all combat forces in Afghanistan, and is now the Commander of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command, a 46 nation coalition of forces in Afghanistan. (*General McChrystal and Dave are friends and Class of 76 grads of West Point*). My old friends and I who attended the induction enjoyed a little reunion, and were amazed to learn during the presentation that approximately 90,000 military personnel are under his command ... not quite the "ten thousand times ten thousand" of angels surrounding God's throne, but we were proud to recognize *nine* thousand times ten thousand are subordinate to our buddy!

In his book entitled *Masquerade: The Amazing Camouflage Deceptions of World War II*, author Seymour Reit tells a tale that had been told and retold with great delight by veteran Allied pilots over the years. Early in the war the Germans built a formidably impressive airfield in occupied Holland ... except that it was built almost entirely of wood. It was nothing more than an elaborate decoy. There were wooden hangars, wooden oil tanks, wooden gun emplacements, wooden trucks and wooden aircraft. However, the Germans took so long in building their wooden decoy that allied photo experts had more than enough time to observe and recognize it for what it was. The day finally came when the decoy was finished, down to the last wooden plank. And early the following morning, a lone Royal Air Force plane crossed the English Channel, came in low, circled the field once, and dropped a large WOODEN bomb. The allies *recognized* the airfield for what it was, and responded accordingly ... with derision. Think for a moment about the word, *Recognition*. Recognition involves a re – cognition. What you perceive rearranges your *cognition*, the way you think. It is a re-thinking in light of the comprehended reality. Had they not *recognized* the decoy, they would have *responded* differently. But they recognized the fake airfield for what it was, and responded accordingly.

On Easter we read John's account where Mary encountered the risen Lord, but did not recognize Him. She thought He was the gardener. Why? As I mentioned Easter, maybe she did not recognize Him because of her tears and anger; which clouded her perception, her *cognition*, of the reality standing right there talking to her. Besides, this was so beyond her experience, so beyond her expectation, so beyond her *cognition*, that someone she had seen so brutally killed could be alive again. Or, maybe she did not recognize Jesus because she had her back to Him; after all, her focus was elsewhere, directed to what she thought was a desecrated tomb. But when Jesus spoke her name tenderly, she turned to him ... and she *recognized* him. And in re-cognizing Jesus, she changed her way of cognition, her way of thinking about what she thought were the dark and tragic realities of life about her. And she responded accordingly. The tears disappeared, her grief transformed to irrepressible delight and joy, and she went running off to tell everyone she had seen the risen Lord! That is what genuine re-cognition of the risen Jesus Christ does. It changes the way you think and act and live and feel ... it changes the way you think about life, about death, about, well, everything! It certainly changes the way you think about yourself and what you will do with the time you have.

Today's lesson from Acts is subtitled in our Bibles as "Saul's conversion." However, I think it might be better to call it "Saul's Re-cognition." For when he recognizes Jesus, it causes him to re-cognate everything, to see everything differently. In his early years, Paul was known as Saul of Tarsus. Tarsus was not a Jewish town; it was in Asia Minor, which means that Saul the Jew most likely grew up around non-Jews. He most likely grew up in a minority, sort of like a Presbyterian in Rhode Island. It seems Saul responded to the challenges of being in a religious minority by taking his faith very seriously. His credentials as an observant Jew were impeccable. He went on to study under the most

prominent rabbis, including the most prominent rabbi of the day, Gamaliel. At the time a great threat to Jewish orthodoxy was this new sect called "The Way." The founder of this Jewish sect had been crucified, but his followers were claiming he rose from the dead. Thousands of Jews had become followers of this Jesus and joined their new organization called the "church." Saul was determined to help put a stop to it. Acts 8:3, *"Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."* When he learned many of these converts were now living in Damascus, Saul got permission from the high priest in Jerusalem to go to Damascus to hunt them down.

Along the way on his mission to set straight these religious heretics, Saul was blinded by light. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, *"Saul, Saul. Why do you persecute me?"* Asking the identity of the voice, Saul learns it is Jesus he is persecuting. By the way, don't let this slip by unnoticed: any act of persecution of Christians, any act of violence or degradation against a follower of Jesus, any act of mistreatment or rudeness toward a fellow Christian, is an act against the Risen Lord Himself! In other words, our Lord takes such things personally! At this point, the vision does nothing but allow Paul to recognize just Who it is he is persecuting, just Who it is he is resisting. Paul then stumbles along the road, blinded, still not comprehending what all of this will mean for him. Note that here we have one of the most dramatic and well known visions of the Risen Lord in the history of Christianity, and it hasn't done a thing but leave a man blind, stumbling and confused! Something more is needed.

Visions can be like that. Visions are not enough. More than a vision is needed. Paul needs some help understanding it. Paul needs some help putting this vision to practical work. And so he stumbles his way to Damascus, refusing to eat or drink while he tries to comprehend what this can mean. Meanwhile, another vision is taking place in Damascus. The risen Lord appears to a disciple named Ananias and tells him to go to Saul who has now arrived in the city, and is staying at a place on Straight Street. *(I just love the Bible's little ironies: Saul went to set the Christians straight, but he's the one who gets set straight on Straight Street. This could be a street name from my home town. My children are always amused that my parents live not far from a main route called Street Road. We don't have a Straight Street in West Chester, but we do have a main thoroughfare through town called Gay Street ... named long before that word's meaning was hijacked. We also have a High Street. It's an old, old joke, but literally true, that in my home town everyone comes in High and goes out Gay.)* Ananias says, "What? Lord, you must be kidding! I've heard about all the many reports about this man and all the harm he has done in Jerusalem and I know why he is coming here." Put yourself in Ananias' place. Ananias was one of those in Damascus hiding from Saul, and Jesus tells him to go to the home where Saul was staying and lay hands on him *(and not around his neck)*. The Lord doesn't really argue with Ananias, He just says, *"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel."* Here we see another man recognizing Jesus, and he re-cognates accordingly. He re-cognates, and his fearful hatred of a perceived enemy turns to compassionate graciousness for a man in need of mercy. Verse 17: *"Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me to you so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.'" In one of the finest moments of the book of Acts, if not the entire New Testament, Ananias goes to his persecutor Saul, places his hands on him, and the very first words Saul hears from the church he tried to destroy, are "Brother Saul."*

Do you think Ananias had any idea what would come of this before he went? Did he have any idea that through his one act of simple obedience the Holy Spirit would descend upon this man who would go on to write the majority of the New Testament? Ananias just does as he is told. He goes to Saul and lays his hands upon him. We read that something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. Saul got up, was baptized and before long he goes out and begins proclaiming the very truth that three days earlier he had been journeying to Damascus to stamp out ... Jesus is the Son of God, He is the Messiah. Once he recognized Jesus, he would go on to recognize Him as the One Who has been the center of his faith all along; He is the One for Whom they have waited, the Messiah. He is the One who made sense out of everything he has come to experience and know and believe. As it turns out, Jesus had great use for a feisty, over-educated Pharisee who grew up with Gentiles. This was the perfect resume for one whose mission was to take the name of Christ into the non-Jewish world. Without his background in Tarsus, Saul would never have understood the Gentiles to whom he introduced Jesus Christ. And without his exacting and thorough training in Jewish law, he would not have been able to use his intellect, his training, his rich understanding of the ways of God to become the primary theologian of the Church of the New Testament.

In closing, I'd like to point out something easily missed. *This took time.* Saul will remain there with the young church in Damascus about 3 years *(see Galatians 1)*. Then, persecution will drive him out of Damascus to the town of his birth, Tarsus. Saul will work in Tarsus, and be nurtured there by the Christian community 14 years before Barnabas comes to take him to Antioch to assist with the mission to the Gentiles. *17 years* take place between this experience on the Damascus Road and Paul's going on his first missionary journey. And none of this would have come to fruition without a faithful church, without 17 years of nurture ... initiated by the gracious, faithful, bold obedience of Ananias. Ananias, the one to first embrace Paul in the love of the Spirit of God, the first to recognize Jesus in Saul. No, it wasn't just the vision on the Damascus Road that turned Saul the persecutor into Paul the Apostle. There were many faithful Ananias-es along the way. Ananias-es who were boldly, quietly, mercifully faithful, and look what happened!

Some of us may be called to be as a Paul. But more likely most of us are called to be Ananiases, simply becoming more faithful right where we are, in your family, in your business, in your friendships, risking those moments when called on to share the loving touch of the Spirit of God as we recognize Jesus when He comes to us.