

April 10, 2016 Third of Easter

Acts 9:1-9 What if?

I have notices that a lot of people are stressing out right now. They are trying to control things that they can't possibly control. It starts out innocently enough trying to contain a certain situation but after a while every issue that crops up needs to be contained or controlled. But this is impossible so the hyper vigilance kicks in and folks can't stop worrying or struggling over a growing number of issues beyond their control. Soon they begin to drive friends or family to distraction and that become another relationship to try to manage. They become anxious and out of control trying to control what can't be controlled, or what isn't theirs to control in the first place.

Friends, we can't control other people, we might think we can but we can't. We can't fix other people no matter how hard we try. We can't control the weather but we sure want to. We can't control all the decisions our loved ones make. We can't make our children or grandchildren return to church or practice the Christian faith. Friends, we get out of control when we try to control what isn't ours to control.

In our scripture reading today Saul is totally out of control unleashing a reign of terror. He is out of control trying to control other people's faith. He is going to root out and get rid of the followers of **Jesus**, the followers of **Jesus'** new Way. Saul takes off for Damascus to do there, what he had been doing in Jerusalem. He is full of the wrath of sanctified violence, and so sure that **God** is on his side. But Saul is out of control and doesn't know it.

When we are so sure of ourselves, when there is no questioning of our motives, purpose, or expectations, we are out of control and not listening to **God**. When we are so full of our own needs, there is no room in our soul for the **Mystery** in the midst of life. But the **good news**, **God** has a way of getting at us!

Saul knew his enemies, his competition. He could recognize their gatherings, their practices and their beliefs. That's how he could find them in the first place. So with a little "active imagination" I can see Saul travelling to Damascus vigilantly, excessively turning over and over in his mind the areas of dispute between his Pharisee-ism and their **Way of Jesus**.

How could this **Jesus** guy allow himself to be crucified by the Romans?

How could they follow a leader who has been tortured, maybe even mutilated, certainly defiled by the unclean enemy?

No way, **God** would not have anything to do with him after such an abomination, after such an abominable act of execution!

But then again the General Resurrection was all about the religious martyrs getting their slain and desecrated bodies back, in good working order. The General Resurrection was about **God's** cleanup plan and those who suffered for the faith were the first to rise; the first to be vindicated by a just and trustworthy **God**.

As he held these conflicting concepts together in his thoughts, I believe, a space opened up within him.

What if all this zeal, all this self-righteous indignation was misguided?

What if all this control through sanctified violence was wrong?

What if it is not about purity but about compassion?

What if it's not about what's right but about what helps?

The, *what if* moment opens up the inner soul-scape for **God's** presence to be entertained. **God** is working on Saul through the backdoor of his mental processes.

No sanctified violence here, but it is crisis time for Saul.

What if he has gotten it all wrong? *What if* it's not his to control?

God gets to Saul in the "*what if moment*," and Saul falls off his high horse.

He falls into three days of dying to the old assurances and expectations of control.

What if this needs to be our story as well?

Acts 9: 10-18 *A New Capacity to Risk, Accommodate and Cope.*

Vicki and I now care for three dogs; one is blind, another has no teeth, another has a pancreatic condition requiring special food:

Two have the same name and two are alpha females.

But it gets worse,
all three are toy poodles, all three have the same light brown colour,
all three want to sleep on the bed, all three want to sit on Vicki at the same time,
all three have their own potty training schedules and issues,
and all three are rescued from someone else's problem.

Now, I vowed way back that I would never have two poodles of any description at the same time ever again. In another life I had a pair of standard poodles that tag teamed and out-smarted us most of the time.

Now, here we are with other people's problem poodles. And other people's problem poodles can really mess up your daily routine not to mention your floors and carpets.

But you know as difficult as it has been, **it has been surprisingly o.k.**
In each case although we were really reluctant, we knew it was the right thing to do, at the right time. Unexpectedly we approached the new daily demands with a different outlook. The cost of this new level of caring and accommodation was somehow o.k.

Friends, when we willingly really put ourselves out for others: When we do the right thing, for the right reasons, at the right time, it changes everything.

We experience a new capacity to risk, accommodate and cope. We enter into a new level of thoughtful, daily Christian practice.

This *new capacity to risk, accommodate and cope* is precisely what is required in the second part of our story. Ananias is being called *to a totally new level of thoughtful, daily Christian practice.* Ananias gets a call to go down to

Straight Street. Read *Set Things Straight Street*. Ananias doesn't want to go. Following **Jesus** is one thing but courting disaster is another. Who in their right mind would want to go? Saul is a dangerous character. But someone opened the path, opened the Way for Ananias and he knows deep down that he must now open the Way for someone else. But why this guy? Why, dangerous, hell bent on murder, Saul? What is **God** thinking?

Friends we know the faith comes to us through the ministry of others. And yet, we can all really relate to Ananias and his struggle. But when we recognize that we are called in the **Spirit** to respond: to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason we know he have to step up to *a new level of thoughtful, daily Christian practice*. With Ananias we *learn through the Spirit a new capacity to risk, accommodate and cope*.

Ananias accepts Brother Saul. He lays hands on him, heals him and lifts Saul up out of his three days of psychic crucifixion and dying to the old assurances and expectations of control.

Through Ananias' *new level of thoughtful, daily Christian practice* an enemy is turned into a friend. Saul becomes Paul and joins the table fellowship of the people of the Way.

Friends the Living Christ often calls each of us to practice our faith in unexpected ways and through uncomfortable accommodations.

Application for Today

The Damascus Road experience only comes through **Spirit** led people who learn to *risk, accommodate and cope*. You never know, the person you bless might just transform the future of the faith?