

**Acts 9: 1-18****Starting Over: The Call to Begin Again****Sunday October 12, 2014****©Rev. Dr. Susan E. Cartmell****The Congregational Church of Needham**

This month our theme for worship is Vocation. All through October our sermons will focus on various Bible stories about men and women who believed that they heard God's call in their lives. Moses heard the call to free the Hebrew slaves. Samuel heard the call to grow up to be a prophet. Esther heard the call to speak up, even though it was dangerous for a woman to do so. Mary heard the call to become the mother of Jesus. All the disciples responded to Jesus' call to leave their lives as fishermen, laborers and tax collectors and join Christ's disciples. Today we have just read the story of Paul, who heard Jesus calling him to stop persecuting the disciples, and become one of the apostles who would shape and form the earliest Christian churches. All the stories of God's call in the Bible make good dramatic readings. But Paul's is one of the most dramatic of all.

Paul was an angry zealot who opposed the followers of Jesus. He spent his time going through Israel finding disciples, infiltrating the houses where they worshipped, and then arresting them and taking them to Jerusalem for religious trials in hopes of imprisoning them by the dozens. Paul was so efficient at finding and persecuting the earliest Christians that he frightened the followers of Jesus. Then one day while he rode to Damascus had a vision of the risen Christ telling him to stop what he was doing. The

experience overwhelmed him so that he was knocked to the ground and blinded temporarily.

Paul's vivid story is so powerful and dramatic that it is hard to imagine something like that ever happening to us today. It is easy to assume that these Bible stories are the creation of old storytellers who know how to spin a yarn around a campfire. The Bible is so full of examples of God's interactions with various people that I cannot believe these experiences are saved for special people in the distant past. God came to so many ordinary people to demonstrate that it is God's nature to try to contact us. It is not just that God wants to connect with us. I believe that God wants to re-connect and re-discover the deep and holy sense of purpose for our lives.

Last week I ended the sermon talking about Agnes Sanford. I found her story in a book I want to recommend- *HEALING THE PURPOSE OF YOUR LIFE* by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn. Sanford was a teacher, writer and active laywoman in her Episcopal Church. She wrote the story of her life in an autobiography entitled *Sealed Orders*. To many of her fans the title of her book sounded a little militaristic, but Sanford wanted to make the point that there is something uniquely meaningful in everyone's life.

She believed that before we are all born we sat down with God and had a chat about our special purpose in the world and what it would be. Instead of obeying God's commands, we are meant to follow these sealed orders, which we have all designed with God, and agreed to in the context of this original open dialogue with the Holy One who

created us. This purpose has less to do with a set of tasks than a way of being in the world, a way of being that gives us choices about how to make the impact that at our core we believe we were created to make.

The Bible says that Paul believed he was doing the right thing when he hunted those early Christians, but in fact, Paul had wandered from his true mission and did not know it. He thought that God wanted him to destroy this reform movement and it was not until Paul had this vision on the road to Damascus that he discovered God wanted to re-connect with him. Let's take a look at the story of Paul's experience and see what it can tell us about how we re-connect with God, and find a deeper sense of purpose in our lives today.

In the first place, you don't have to be perfect to get a call from God. Paul was persecuting Christians and God recruited him to start the church of Jesus Christ. God took the man who was the biggest threat to the early church and turned him into its biggest ally and leader. The story reminds us that whatever faults we have or mistakes we have made they will not be barriers to God's service. Your faults may even reveal your purpose. Paul's did.

Paul was not like the other disciples. He was not a fisherman, but a Jewish leader from a cosmopolitan seaport on the Mediterranean. Tarsus was one of the largest cities in Turkey and the Roman capital of the province. A nexus for trade between Europe and Africa, Tarsus was where Marc Antony met Cleopatra.

Paul was the proud son of a prominent Jewish family from the tribe of Benjamin, whose ancestors controlled the city of Jerusalem. A leader among the Pharisees, Paul possessed a brilliant legal mind and benefitted from the best education money could buy. He was admired for good reason, but his arrogance gave him confidence that the new church needed. His education and background made it possible for him to move in any circle of society.

On top of this Paul was passionate. He believed in Judaism, and fought to defend it. He saw the disciples as enemies of God and was zealous in pursuing them. He was never tentative about his faith but fervent. Now before this vision Paul was consumed with the rounding up the disciples and persecuting them, but sometimes our mistakes are actually the door to our true purpose.

Paul's passion and his worldly patina were exactly what the early church needed to go from a backwater cult of disciples to a religious movement with broad international appeal. The very qualities that made him a fierce opponent of the early Christians were the same qualities that enabled Paul to found Christian Churches all over the Mediterranean. The zeal Paul had to hunt disciples became the zeal he needed to tell new audiences about Jesus. The energy Paul found to stop the disciples became the energy he used to recruit disciples. The very qualities that made Paul a formidable foe also made him a very effective apostle.

If your faults sometimes seem more obvious to you than God's dreams for you then maybe you can imagine yourself saying - "When I think about my faults how can I

imagine myself using the same energy for good purposes?" Finding God's purpose for our lives can heal our past, whatever regrets we have.

In the second place, finding God's purpose for our lives can heal our hurts.

The *Boston Globe Magazine* ran an article in the magazine last weekend (October 6, 2014) about new teachers and why they have chosen teaching. One 53-year-old, Susan Roy, is starting a new career in Hingham as a kindergarten teacher. She decided to pursue this career after she had a son with severe autism. He was mute until he was 4 years old, but his teachers gave her hope. Now as a teacher herself, she is working with 4 and 5 year olds, to share hope and I suspect to also heal herself.

In the last few weeks I have been enjoying watching *The Roosevelts*, Ken Burns' movie about three American leaders who shaped our country during the last century- Teddy, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. One of the lessons I have learned in watching this series is that these three great leaders may have come from affluent families but none of the three escaped life's disappointments or hard blows. They all bore the marks of families that knew depression, alcoholism and occasional cruelty. Eleanor is widely regarded as one of the greatest women in American history and yet she suffered a great deal in her early years, and she carried that sorrow always. Her own mother showed open disdain for her daughter's looks. Eleanor's mother-in-law wielded such power in their home that she often criticized Eleanor as an inadequate mother, an unattractive woman, and an unsatisfying wife. Eleanor grew up feeling criticized and abandoned. Yet what made her so noble is that she turned her personal disappointment into a zeal for the poor and less fortunate. She healed her own hurt by reaching out to the working

class, and advocating for child laborers. She healed her personal pain by addressing the systemic injustice that made life painful for others. God can use our hurt to help us find our highest purpose.

God does not want our suffering to determine our lives, but God so often finds ways to heal the hurts we have known in order to use us to make the world better. These painful periods become valuable pieces in the puzzle of our purpose in life.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth – “Love is patient, love is kind. Love is not jealous or arrogant or boastful or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things.” (I Corinthians 13) The mature man who wrote these words was no stranger to life’s disappointments.

Finally Paul's story reminds us that God's call comes to us over and over all through our lives. Paul’s strength as an apostle came from his ability to hear God’s voice. Paul heard God’s call on the Road to Damascus, and then over and over on his travels starting churches, as his faith and mission grew in service of Christ.

Looking back over his life, Paul wrote to the fledgling church at Philippi, “If anyone had reason to feel confident, I have more. A Hebrew, born of Hebrews, a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness blameless whatever gains I use to have, those I have come to regret, to regard as loss. For Christ’s sake I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish. Before I thought I had everything, but in this new life I

have found faith and the righteousness that comes from it.” In this new life Paul had his call renewed every day. Each time he bowed his head to talk to God he re-connected to his highest sense of purpose.