

June 9, 2013
Third Sunday after Pentecost – *St. Paul*

Bible Character file
(Series C)

Galatians 1:22-24 (from the Epistle)

And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

PERSECUTOR TURNED PREACHER

How many of you like to watch cartoons? Who are some of your favorite Disney characters -- Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy, and Pluto? They are all *good* guys, but how about some *bad* guys? Most people don't like to talk about the villains and crooks in the world of make-believe, because they don't want to be like them. Teenagers might think the wicked Jafar is cool because he is tall, and pay no attention to the fact he wants to kill Aladdin. While it's true the evil Maleficent makes the story of Sleeping Beauty more interesting, children shudder in fear when she changes into a huge fire-breathing dragon. You're not likely to see the Big Bad Wolf among the characters at Disneyland because his tail gets pulled off, his legs gets kicked, and his safety is never secure – and that's what the adults do to him – because he is the bad guy that wants to eat the three little pigs! Little kids are afraid of him. He's bad, really bad; and bad guys don't turn into good guys.

The real world isn't much different. Sometimes the news is like watching cartoons. Maybe you already have your favorite characters – some are good and some are bad, very bad. Most of the really bad guys are from somewhere else – maybe Russia, North Korea, or the Middle East – names like Vladimir Putin, Kim Yong-un, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Learning to pronounce them isn't easy. But a few may be closer to home. In fact, they could be right here, at school, at work, or sitting next to you. They have names, too. Who is the bad guy most threatening to your way of life – the kid at school who poked you in the nose, the boss at work who fired your best friend, the ex-spouse who robbed your life savings in a court of law, or some other evil person you see as bad to the bone, really bad with no chance of ever being good? (*pause*) Do you have someone in mind? Now, hold that thought while I ask the next question. This is crucial for understanding today's text. **Could that bad guy turn into a good guy?** Could that individual you know as evil, change into someone you could respect, honor, or admire? Is this possible? Would you welcome such a radical change, or conversion? Our text for today raises the issue. A really bad guy turned into a good guy, the --

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Allow me to introduce him. When he was born in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia (*now South Central Turkey*) His Jewish parents named him **Saul**, after Israel's first king who was also from the tribe of Benjamin. He was destined for greatness. As a young man he studied under the best teacher of his time, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He worked hard to excel in every facet of Judaism, and became a Pharisee. He was the best of the best, ranking at the head of his class (Acts 23:6). He knew the Old Testament backwards and forward with all of the rules and regulations of his religious tradition – better than anyone!

It didn't take long for Saul to square off with the followers of *the way* (Acts 9:2), named after the new messianic leader Jesus. Everything Saul thought was true about himself, his world, and the future of his people was threatened by Christianity. The law he had memorized and held high as his own standard of excellence, could not save him according to the teachings of Christ. The law only had power to convince and convict a man of his sins. No amount of civilian righteousness (even in religious practice) could atone for man's trespasses and tendencies toward evil. To Saul nothing made *less* sense than the Gospel. Anyone who persisted in believing in *the way* of Christ instead of the sacred traditions and teachings of the temple, could not be tolerated in the community. Saul was not going to let his hard work and zeal for what he believed take a back seat to the Christian movement. He decided to do everything possible to eradicate the followers of Jesus. According to his religion, he was doing God a favor. For example,

- When Stephen was taken by an angry mob for preaching the Gospel, and murdered in the street just for being a Christian, Saul stood by and watched him die. (Acts 7:58; 8:1)
- With a list of names and addresses of those known to be Christians, Saul ravaged the church; he went door to door, and had them dragged from their homes and put into prison. (Acts 8:3)
- While traveling on the road to Damascus, with warrants for the arrest of Christians using the synagogue, Saul intended to kill every one of the followers of the way he found there. (Acts 9:1)

It didn't take long for Saul's reputation to precede him. He was the bad guy that Christians tried their best to avoid. He was like a one-man *Gestapo* determined to destroy and terrorize the followers of Jesus Christ. No wonder the news of his miraculous change of heart was such a shock! Was it really true? Was it possible for a bad guy to turn into a good guy? The report was hard to believe, even second-hand:

They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." Verse 23

No one knows for sure what happened.

Not even Saul himself could explain what happened. Only God knows for sure, because he was the one responsible for turning such a terrible enemy into the greatest missionary of the Christian church. Only God could see the invisible motives and desires, woven deeply into the complex personality of a driven man named Saul. Only God could soften the heart hardened by sin, and redirect what had been intended for evil into a good thing. Only God could change a bad guy into a good guy with a new name to go with it – Saul into Paul, the one who became known as the --

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What does this mean? Try this one.

Saul gave up his religion to follow Christ.

This sounds strange, but it's true. Religion that is shaped by our own ideas about God, by what others have said about God, or by the things we have been taught to do for God ... can become an obstacle to saving faith. Religion for its own sake can become a dangerous pathway leading to death when the traditions and teachings *about* God become substitutes for a personal commitment to a real person – Jesus Christ.

Blinded by his own religious pride, driven by his hatred for anyone who opposed his religious view, and misled into thinking that his religion could save him, Saul perpetuated this form of idolatry. He persecuted the church in the name of religion! He didn't just ridicule it; he attacked it – seeking to kill all believers in Christ. Now this may come as a shock, but we make the same mistake every time we sin. Maybe we think we are doing God a favor when we take matters into our own hands to preserve what we think is right. But it is possible that our religion is persecuting Christ. For example,

- My mind is made up so don't confuse me with facts.
(I don't care what the Bible says, it has to be my way!)
- My answer is “no” because we've never done it that way before.
(We can disagree, but you're wrong!)
- My behavior is justified because it's for the church.
(There is no argument; God is on my side!)

Maybe we need to give up our religion to follow Christ. It isn't about what's in it for me – it's about Christ who died and rose from the dead to bring life.

- In *Holy Baptism* we are given a new name, the name of Christ, which is why to this day we are called Christians.
- In *Holy Communion* we are invited to a banquet by Christ himself, which is why as members of the Christian community we gather together at the Lord's table.
- In *Holy Scripture* we are reminded from beginning to end that it is all about Christ, which is why we read and study everything revealed to us for our life and salvation.

There is so much we can learn from Christ who turned a bad guy into a good guy, an enemy into a friend, and saved the --

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In 1868 Daniel March, a congregational pastor from Philadelphia, put it this way:

*If you cannot speak like angels,
If you cannot preach like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus;
You can say he died for all.*

TLH 497, LSB 826:2

There is sign that speaks for every Christian on *the way* under construction:

God isn't finished with me yet.

In Jesus' Name,
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