Amazing Bravery, Amazing Grace
Acts 9:1-20
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Third Sunday of Easter

Woodbury UMC
May 1, 2022

 Just consider it for a moment. You wouldn’t be happy if someone called you a racist, but you do agree that in years past, things were better. The town looked different, and most of the people were good hard-working Christian Americans, like you. Now it feels like most people moving to the area don’t look like you and don’t think like you. Someone should do something about it. And you’ve found a group of people who think similarly, that we need to take back our community for people like us, and it is so great to finally be able to say openly what we all know to be true. Not everyone gets it, so you are careful who you tell about being a Klansman, but even so, you know you are doing something important for your community, for your kids and their future, teaching them to be proud of who they are, to not feel any shame about their heritage or their race. Others agree, and you occasionally meet with others who want to get involved. One man said he wants to meet you to learn more, and as he walks into your office, your heart starts pounding. Because the person extending his hand to you is a Black man.

 Today we have a powerful scriptural story, and in trying to think of an equally powerful way in, I remembered hearing about Daryl Davis, a black man and blues musician who has been befriending members of the Ku Klux Klan for the past 30 years.

He says as they get to know each other, the Klansmen realize that their hate may be misguided. Since Davis started talking with these members, he says 200 Klansmen have given up their robes and given them to him. That is from an interview given several years ago, I’m sure that number has gone up since then.

 Davis is worth looking up if you don’t know his story (see notes at the end of this document). He started meeting Klansmen through his music, the first time with a man complimenting him that he’d never heard of a Black man able to play piano like Jerry Lee Lewis, then disbelieving when told that Black people had developed that style of music. As they became friends, the man learned that many of his beliefs were founded in untruth, and slowly things began to change.

 One of Davis’s first and most fabled encounters was with Grand Dragon Robert Kelly, who eventually became the Imperial Wizard of Maryland. After having his secretary set up a meeting with Kelly under the pretense of including him in a book about the KKK, Davis knew he was entering new territory. Kelly was unaware that Davis was black, so the grand reveal was a shock. After a few tense hours of conversation, the two parted ways, but their relationship did not end there.

 Eventually, Kelly began inviting Davis to his home and then to Klan rallies in which ritualistic chants were intoned, giant crosses were burned, and beer and hot dogs were served. Kelly shared everything with him, including the deeply racist stereotypes that help form the foundation of the Klan’s hatred.

Here are Davis’s words in an anecdote, maybe my favorite I’ve heard from him:[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Initially, they feel that if you're not white, you are inferior. [They believe] that black people have smaller brains, we're incapable of higher achievement. I'll give you an example of one. This guy was an exalted cyclops sitting in my car in my passenger seat. He made the statement, which I'd heard before, "Well we all know that all black people have within them a gene that makes them violent." I turned to him and I'm driving and I said, "Wait a minute. I'm as black as anybody you've ever seen. I have never done a carjacking or a drive by, how do you explain that?" He didn't even pause to think about it. He said, "Your gene is latent. It hasn't come out yet."*

*So how do you argue with somebody who is that far out in left field? I was dumbfounded. I'm just driving along. He's sitting over here all smug and secure, like "See you have no response?" And I thought about it for a minute. Then I used his point of reference. I said, "Well, we all know that all white people have a gene within them that makes them a serial killer." He says, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, name me three black serial killers." He thought about it — he could not do it. I said, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy. All whites. I said, "Son, you are a serial killer." He says "Daryl, I've never killed anybody." I said, "Your gene is latent. It hasn't come out yet." He goes, "Well, that's stupid!" I said, "Well, duh. Yes, but you know what, you're right. What I said was stupid, but no more stupid than what you said you me." Then he got very, very quiet and changed the subject. Five months later, based on that conversation he left the Klan. His robe was the first robe I ever got.*

Powerful, right?

 According to Acts 9, Ananias was living in Damascus. Imagine what it must have been like to have been Ananias. He was one of the earliest prominent followers of Jesus. According to church history he is most often described as a disciple, but that is essentially all we know about him. As soon as the scriptural text introduces him, Jesus speaks to him in a dream, telling him to go to a certain place and meet a certain man. And then he names the man, and Ananias freezes.

 Ananais is to go to where Saul of Tarsus was in hiding. Saul had famously become notorious as a persecutor of the early church and its members. This very scripture describes Saul as “breathing threats and murder” against any disciples of Jesus, and a disciple of Jesus he would have good reason to expect the worst. Hesitation seems quite rational on his part!

 Ananais plays a pivotal role in the history of the Christian faith. In his act of obedience to Christ, he effectively enables all the work done by Paul in creating the early church, bringing it to the Gentiles, and even writing much of our Christian scriptures. Yet with so little known about him, he is practically anonymous. This sort of Biblical figure fascinates me, a minor role in a monumental narrative. In obedience he performs an act of mercy for a feared enemy, and in doing so discovers a man who had been profoundly shaken by a personal encounter with God. This passage is remarkable in its telling of one of the all-time great religious conversion accounts.

 Jesus takes action first, of course, speaking to Saul and even blinding him. That said, we should not discount what happened next: he received hospitality for three days before Ananais arrived. Ananais didn’t approach Saul with any anger or outrage over what he had done, or fear based on his reputation, instead greeting him by name as a brother in Christ. He laid hands on him as instructed, and when this miracle of healing had happened, Ananais was the first person the profoundly changed Saul sees. He had nothing to eat or drink for three days, yet the scripture says that even before food and water, his first request was to be baptized. When he finally did have a meal, he did so as a brother in Christ.

 At each one of these interactions, each person involved treats their enemy with compassion and Christian charity, and any hint of antagonism was quickly gone. This kindness seems instrumental in helping Paul find his way as a fervent new disciple. Had his dramatic experience been followed by anything less, I’d think that would have at least impacted Paul’s decision to stay several days with the disciples. The result of this encounter was that the world changed.

 Two conditions were essential in this outcome: both men had a vision of Jesus, and both were in a place of great vulnerability, conditions that meant both of them could be changed by this encounter. This was no **transaction**, where one person acts and the other is impacted. It was a **relationship** that affected both of them. Saul found himself in a position of vulnerability to people who had good reason to hate him, and Ananais had reason to think he was walking into a trap.

 Again, what must it have felt like to be Daryl Davis as the only Black man in a honky tonk bar, realizing he’s at a table with probably more than a few Klansmen? What must it have been like to be the Imperial Wizard, and someone wants to meet with you about the Klan, and a Black man walks into your office? Are you about to be beaten? Is he a cop? You would have good reason to feel fear. And of course, this is the encounter I had in mind when I wrote that beginning of the sermon.

 I suspect many of us have experienced being both Saul and Ananais at one time or another, enemies in a structure that left little room for ambiguity, either disciple or zealot, persecuted or oppressor. Unusually, both were in a position of tremendous vulnerability, a necessary condition for growth. You don’t grow if you cannot allow yourself to be vulnerable. (That deserves its own sermon.) There is great simplicity and mutuality in this interaction, but oh, so very difficult to do!

 We are in the Easter season, just past celebrating the resurrection, and a big reminder that all of the things that slot us into one side of a culture war or political allegiance—well, compared to what we share in Christ, none of that matters. It gives me hope that if we are rooted in Christ, and are brave enough to risk being vulnerable, we can and will find chances to build a community that celebrates what each person brings to it, rather than using difference as a reason for fear and mistrust. Whether race, or sexuality, or faith beliefs, or political persuasion, or gender identity, or any of the most challenging aspects of human society, there are always people able to see the humanity in the opposition, and indeed see the spark of the Divine in each person.

It is hard, but far from impossible. After all, In Maryland, right now, there is a Black man with more than 200 KKK robes in his closet.

 This scripture is a welcome reminder that it is possible to overcome even the bitterest of divides. Like the time of Ananais and Saul, American society in 2022 is a time and place with little nuance between adversaries. With effort and determination, we can bridge these divides, but it will not happen without risk. To get to know a person is for them to get to know you, and for a person to come to a new understanding of you, you need to be willing to rethink and even discard beliefs that had been comforting but you realize are needlessly divisive. For many of us, bridging these divides means some discomfort – remember the long silence after discussing how all whites are serial killers. But if you are honest and don’t hide from uncomfortable truths, you can be a person who is actively bridging divides and bringing healing starting with yourself.

 In Christ, we are reborn. Pretty words, but being actually reborn is a complete change in identity, and way too much for most of us to confront. I pray that we gathered in the name of Christ are willing to give it a try, even if it means hard truths must be acknowledged, because in doing so we are made more closely into the image of our redeemer.

 Ananais only comes up one other time that I know of, in Acts chapter 22, when Paul describes Ananias as "a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews" that dwelt in Damascus.” I wonder at the friendship that likely developed between these two, coming from different cultures yet grounded in service to Jesus. When people meet under those circumstances, it is bound to be a significant shared experience.

I bet when they had an opportunity to reflect on it all, they realized how fortunate they each were that Christ had brought them together. If you can manage that, you have conditions that can change the world.

Come, Lord Jesus, and may it be so with us too. Amen.

Notes:

Daryl Davis: the black musician who converts Ku Klux Klan members,

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/mar/18/daryl-davis-black-musician-who-converts-ku-klux-klan-members>

‘How Can You Hate Me When You Don’t Even Know Me?’, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/26/opinion/racism-politics-daryl-davis.html>

How One Man Convinced 200 Ku Klux Klan Members To Give Up Their Robes, <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robes>

1. https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robes [↑](#footnote-ref-1)