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THE PAUL PROBLEM Michael B. Beaugh
Acts 9:1-19 October 18, 2009
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The Book of Acts records the early history of the church, its beginning, and its spread throughout the Roman Empire. In case you've never heard this before, Paul was the main guy. He started churches all the way from Jerusalem to Rome. He even planned to go to Spain, but didn't make it because of his untimely death at the hands of the Roman Emperor.

In Acts 9, we find the story of **the conversion of the Apostle Paul**. Don't you just love stories like this one? I do.

The apostle Paul, known as Saul in this story, did not start out as a fan of Jesus. He thought the followers of Jesus were heretics who needed to be run out of town. Authorized by the Chief Priest, it was his job to arrest Christians and throw them in prison without parole. He even helped with the execution of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, by holding the coats of those who threw the stones. A really bad guy!

Then one day, Jesus appeared in a vision to Saul as he was on the road to Damascus to arrest more Christians, and everything changed. The appearance of Jesus was so bright that it blinded Saul. It was the white hot grace of God, the blinding grace of God that would lead to Saul becoming Paul and the greatest Christian missionary of the first century.

When he finally received his sight again, a whole new world opened for him. Instead of being an enemy of Jesus, he became an envoy for Jesus. He became a driven man who told crowds of people about the gospel. He could not hold it in. He had no doubt about the difference being a Christian made in his life. He had no doubt about the difference begin a Christian could make in the lives of others. He was a new man and the world has not been the same since.

Now as much as I like Paul's conversion story, I have a confession to make. **I must admit that I identify more with the other guy mentioned in Acts 9, Ananias, the fearful evangelist.** You see, God gave Ananias a Paul problem. Ananias had a vision, too. Jesus told Ananias to go and find Saul to help him regain his sight. Look at what Ananias did. He basically said, "No way. It wouldn't be prudent." Ananias had heard of Saul and was afraid down to his toes.

Fearful evangelist. I confess that's me all over. God sends me out to share my faith, and what do I say most of the time? "Nope. Not me. It wouldn't be prudent."

Now, based on our church-wide study *Unbinding Your Heart*, I know that I am in good company this morning. According to the author Martha Grace Reese, there aren't many "Paul's" among us in churches like ours, what she calls mainline churches. We aren't too much into the faith sharing thing. Martha Grace Reese spent four years interviewing lots of Christians and even discovered that most pastors in the historic mainline churches are about the worst of the lot when it comes to faith sharing. And really that's too bad. And so she has published her results in hopes of motivating us to do better. We are studying her results in hopes of becoming better at it at SBPC.

So let me share with you this morning three things that can motivate us to become faith sharers.

First, Jesus commands us to go and share our faith just like he commanded Ananias. No excuses are good enough. In Acts 1:8, Jesus is getting ready to ascend into heaven 40 days after his resurrection. He says to his disciples – he says us – you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Notice he doesn't say he hopes we will be his witnesses. He doesn't suggest that we be his witnesses once we have the courage or time. He doesn't say once you have the training, you'll do it. He says you shall. Not only is he predicting what will happen, but he is also commanding his disciples to go to do it.

Were the disciples afraid? Well, yes, they were terrified. They actually hid out in Jerusalem behind locked doors. Did they know what to say? Not any more than we do. So what happened? The Spirit came upon them, and they found the courage and the words to start telling the world the incredible good news of the love of God in Jesus Christ. They learned that not only does Jesus command us to share, but he then gives us the words to say.

If for no other reason, we should be sharing our faith simply because our Lord has commanded us to do it.

Since being commanded to do something does not mean we will automatically do it, there are other motivations. How about this one? God wants us to reach people for whom God has a plan. This is the motivation that finally got Ananias to move. Ananias said he was afraid, and Jesus explained how Saul was being chosen by God as an instrument to take the good news to Gentiles and kings and to the people of Israel. God wanted Ananias to play midwife to the birthing faith of Saul who was chosen by God to change the entire world.

So what about those whom God brings into your path? What do you think God might want to do through them if only you and I were to help open their hearts to the love of God? Just like Ananias, we are the key to unlocking the lives of others as instruments of God's purpose.

Let me tell you this story that Martha Grace Reese tells in her book *Unbinding the Gospel*.

It happened in a church in Florida. It seems that prostitutes began loitering on the corner where this church was located. Most people in the congregation were upper-middle class, African-Americans who had been in church all their lives. They were not happy that the neighborhood was changing. They were really not happy about the prostitution that was creeping into their parking lot. They grumbled over the cigarette butts by the sanctuary steps. They worried about the "bad P.R." the church was getting. It never would have occurred to anyone that the women hanging out on the corners were candidates for evangelism. Candidates for jail, yes, but not candidates for evangelism! Not in their beloved church!

But one day, a faithful church member named Mary changed all that. This retired school teacher left choir practice on a Wednesday and saw one of the prostitutes leaning against a lamppost in the church parking lot. Singing. Right by the member's parked Camry. Mary says she felt pushed by the Spirit - she couldn't find other words for it - to go talk to this woman in the pink leather hot pants. "Hi. My name is Mary. I was just singing with my choir in there. You have a beautiful voice."

"Yeah, I love singin'," the young woman mumbled. "I'm Sheena."

"Sheena, you ought to be singing for the Lord - you want to come to sing with me in my choir?" That sweet church member almost fainted as she heard the words come out of her own mouth! But Sheena finally said yes. She showed up on the corner the next Wednesday before choir practice. Mary took her in. Sheena did have a beautiful voice.

With the encouragement of the church, with tutoring from Mary, Sheena got her GED. She went to college! She finished medical school. Now, that former prostitute runs a medical clinic. Out of her church.

Can you imagine being the one who unbinds the heart of someone to become an instrument of God's purpose?

If that's not enough motivation, here is one more. Every one of us who has chosen to follow Christ and has experienced his loving grace in our lives has a story to tell. If I were to ask each of you to answer the question "What difference does being a Christian make in your life?" you could come up with an answer. That answer is what others need to hear. The lost and the lonely. A friend of yours. A co-worker. A family member. A chance acquaintance.

To get ready for our Growth Groups this fall, we took the group leaders through training for *Unbinding Your Heart*. I heard beautiful faith stories. I want you to hear one of those. I have asked Jim Carter to answer

that question this morning, "What difference has being a Christian made in your life?"

(Jim's story)

What is your story? What are the blessings you have received as a follower of Jesus? What difference does he make in your life? You see, once you recognize the blessings, you start filling up. And once you fill up, you just can't hold it in.

Think of our motivation for sharing our faith like filling up a pitcher. Here is where you get to help with preaching the sermon this morning. This big bowl of water represents the blessings that come with knowing Jesus Christ. I am going to ask you to name some of those blessings out loud. As you do, I will dip water from the big bowl into this pitcher until the pitcher overflows.

So just shout it out. What is it you receive from Christ? What fills your heart to overflowing?

"I have comfort from my church." [Fill up pitcher a little.]

"I feel a purpose in my life." [Fill it up a little more.]

"I get direction from the Bible." [Fill up more.]

"I don't ever feel alone." [Fill up a little more.]

"I have hope that everything will turn out alright one day." [Fill up again.]

"I am a part of God's work in the world." [Fill up again.]

"I know I will go to heaven when I die." [Fill up to the top.]

All of these fill us up until we are overflowing. It is the best motivation there is. We are motivated to share with others because we know what a difference Jesus Christ makes in our own lives, right here and right now! We know he can make a difference in the lives of others.

Here is what I want you to realize this morning. You don't have to be an Apostle Paul to share your faith. You don't have to have an experience like Paul's. How thrilling to hear "before and after" stories like his! "I was lost but now I am found." No, just be an Ananias. God needs all the Ananiases He can motivate. God wants to unbind our hearts so we can unbind the hearts of others. Are you willing to let God do that in you?