

EASTER THREE, YEAR C, MAY 1, 2022

Several years ago I read a book called *Storyteller* by Jodi Picoult. It's about a young woman who attends a grief group after the death of her mother. She meets an elderly gentleman who is also in the group since the death of his wife. They strike up an unusual friendship – a 25 year old and a 90 year old. She is a baker and a lapsed Jew. He is a beloved pillar of the community, having taught German in the schools for many years and raised money for many charities that benefited the community. Only this gentleman is not who he seems to be and after he gets to know her has an unusual request to make of the young woman.

It turns out he was a former SS officer who had been at Auschwitz, who managed to change his identity, move to Canada then the US and became a model citizen. The young woman, who hardly considered herself Jewish, had a grandmother who had been in Auschwitz. The request the gentleman has is twofold. He wants her, number one, to forgive him for all the atrocities and murders he committed, and number two help him die for he believes he deserves to be dead. This puts her in a conundrum.

Over and over the young woman keeps questioning herself about how someone who had committed so many atrocities could then go on and live an exemplary life for 70 years. She asks herself, if he's asking for forgiveness doesn't that mean he can't be a monster and does have a conscience? Interesting moral dilemmas are presented in the book. If she helps him die she asks herself, "Am I'm doing it out of anger, out of hate. And does that bring me down to his level and make me just as big of a monster as he? Can she really forgive someone who murdered thousands of Jews and made her grandmothers life a living hell? There are many twists and turns in the book as she tries to figure out what is the moral thing to do.

What would you do? Could you forgive someone like this man who had participated in so many atrocities in the concentration camp? Would you help him to die? What is the moral thing to do?

The reason I mention the plot of this book to you is because of the story we read this morning from Acts about the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. But it's not the conversion of Saul to Paul that captures my interest but the subplot of this story involving Ananias. Ananias also had to deal with a terrible moral dilemma.

Ananias was one of the leaders of the young church. One of his responsibilities was to protect this infant group of believers as there were very real enemies who were out to destroy them. The Romans, for one, had labeled Jesus as a traitor and executed him and were not fond of his followers. For the most part many of the early Christian believers were living under the radar because they were a group within an officially recognized religion –Judaism. They still met in the synagogues and considered themselves Jews. The Romans were tolerant of the Jews but their safety net was beginning to unravel from the efforts of people like Saul.

Ananias knew Saul was a participant in the murder of Stephen – the first Christian martyr. Saul was so fiercely opposed to the Jesus followers that it was said he breathed threats of destruction, intolerance and even murder to anyone he found to be a follower. He was systematically going to the synagogues bent on weeding out all the People of the Way as they were known then. Then Ananias received word that Saul, this self appointed persecutor of the Jesus movement was coming to town. Ananias probably was trying to

figure out how he could protect the most vulnerable Christians while realizing a lot could end up being arrested or worse.

Then the most unexpected thing happened to him. The word of God came to Ananias in a vision. He did not perceive it as an encouraging word at all. It was a command that put Ananias into a moral dilemma. He was being asked by God to "Get up, go over to Straight Street, to Judas' house and look for a man named Saul who comes from Tarsus."

This was the very same Saul who had come to Damascus to scoop up and arrest Ananias and any other Jesus-follower he could get his hands on. This was going straight into the enemy camp. This was not someone you wanted to meet over coffee and iron out a few difficulties. This was directly reaching out to someone who wanted to harm you; someone who may even wish you dead. This is someone who had participated in the deaths of other Christians. Could a leopard really change his spots? How could he do what God was asking him to do? No wonder Ananias questioned God's sanity and spoke up: "Excuse me God. But can I just check that we're talking about the same Saul? It is an awfully common name. Are you sure you didn't mean the Saul that comes from Truro?" God replies, "Get going: I've got things for him to do and he can't start until you're done with him."

This was a moral dilemma. Does Ananias yield to the fear, disgust and hatred he had for Saul or does he trust God enough to put aside his feelings and embrace Saul? What would you do? Could you put aside your fears and walk into the enemy camp not knowing what fate awaited you? Could you really trust your vision and what God was asking you to do?

We know Ananias gathered up his faith and his courage, went to the street called Straight and did what he was asked. The rest, as they say, is Christian history. But it wasn't easy. Ananias had a great deal at stake and Saul was a known quantity. Ananias didn't know how this encounter would turn out. He had to trust God. In the end it was by the grace of God that Paul went from being a zealous Jew bent on killing Christians to being a zealous apostle of Christ bent on bringing the good news to Jews and Gentiles alike.

To recap the story of Paul for a moment we know that Paul was blinded by a light on the road to Damascus and was sent into the city to wait. After waiting three days the Spirit gave Paul new eyes of faith, new eyes of the heart, to see those he knew well in a new light. He was transformed from being an enemy of the fledgling church to becoming a member of the new community of faith through baptism. Paul was able to see himself through the eyes of Christ, and so he was enabled to see his fellow Jews in a new light. It was possible for him to see the Gentiles--Greeks, Romans, Syrians, people not so different from you and me--in a new light. But just as Paul's eyes were open so were Ananias'. Ananias was given new sight to trust God and to see Paul, not as his enemy, but someone who God loved. Ananias' faith was also transformed at this moment as he began to see Paul in a new light. His heart saw that even those we think are not worthy in God's eyes truly are. To us, both Ananias and Paul can open our eyes to new life in Christ of God's incredible inclusive accepting love of all humankind.

The women and men in the first century were called by Paul and Ananias into this ministry of reconciliation, to see others as beloved, to accept others for who they are and through them Jesus calls us to be ambassadors of the Good News as well. Paul and

Ananias can help us to see the world through Christ's eyes of love, forgiveness, and inclusivity.

So what does this say to us as disciples, as a community of faith, all these years later? It means that just like Ananias and Paul sometimes we need to have our eyes opened over and over again so our prejudices are stripped away, like scales from our eyes. We are never too old to have our lives altered.

Ask ourselves, what scales need to fall from our eyes that will help us to see everyone as God's beloved children? How do we open our eyes to the inclusive love of God in Christ? The Christian community is not about erecting barriers to belonging but about tearing them down. Ananias, learned that God has called us to open the door to even those we fear, are apprehensive about, don't understand or just plain despise.

Just as Jesus called and welcomed those who were outsiders in his society; who were despised and rejected by others who found themselves welcomed by him, we are to lift the scales from our eyes and see the power of God's love that can transform even our most hardened prejudices so we too can have our hearts and souls changed. Jesus says to us, "Do you love me?" His says; "Come with me and then go to those you see as different--go even to those you have seen as enemies. Go and your eyes will be opened again and again to see the redeeming power of God's love transform your life. Amen.