



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

Date: April 10, 2016

Title: "Welcome the Weird"

Scripture: Acts 9:1-7

Description: The story of Saul on the road to Damascus is more than a template on being converted. It's part of a series of short stories in Acts about widening the circle of God's people. Through this story, God calls us to widen our circle of friends to include people not like us.

Saul on the Road to Damascus—the classic "Come-to-Jesus" story. This is how it's done; if you're needing to get saved, this is how.

Saul, arresting and imprisoning Christians, sees the light, falls on his knees and turns his life around in a dramatic one-eighty. Hey, it happens. Still does. Waka Flocka Flame is a rap musician from Riverdale, Ga. I'm not a big fan; his early music celebrated the wrong things: materialism, egoism, and sexual exploits. I'm just old-fashioned, I guess.

So Waka Flocka, in an interview last September, told of a single experience that turned him completely around. During a trip to Africa, he met a teenaged boy who had never owned a pair of shoes. Ever. Waka Flocka was completely stunned. "That's why I stopped wearing jewelry", he reports. "I started seeing these people. I was giving my diamond chains, breaking them apart. I'm dead serious! It changed my perception on life"

According to Waka Flocka, he now sees the music industry as being meaningless and materialistic. It doesn't celebrate things that really matter. Instead, he now invests his money in technology, healthcare, and environmental programs. In other words, Waka Flocka experienced a rebirth. His entire life changed. The road to Damascus still exists.

It happens. Psalm 30 says, "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy." If you have somebody in your life that you've just about given up on, God has not lost the power to turn people around. Keep praying; keep hoping. I'm not saying that if you have a spouse that's abusing you, stay in the marriage anyway, or if you have a child addicted to drugs, keep giving them money whenever they ask. You have to set limits to protect yourself. But you

don't have to give up hope. The God who worked miracles still does. Even Saul got saved; even Waka Flocka became a humanitarian.

But what if you've already been saved? What if you've already seen the light and answered Jesus' call and your life has already been turned around? Or what if you were somehow blessed with a life that has always known God's touch? (8:30) Like Janice, whose dad was a pastor whose children could see his values and hear some of his stories at home. Like Tim, who went to a Catholic school where he felt the nuns and priests who taught there genuinely cared for him. (11:00—Like Mike, whose childhood church not only taught him about Jesus but provided a place where the kids in the neighborhood could gather safely and put those values into practice among each other.)

If you're already a Christ-follower, what do you do when you hear the story of Saul's conversion? Does this story offer anything for us? A wise Bible teacher from my past insisted: if we don't hear a Bible story as being about us, then we haven't heard it. So we need to ask, how are we in this story?

From the beginning of the story, Saul was all about being completely dedicated to serving God. But the God he served was too small. Saul's God needed defending and protecting. That is so sad. God does not need our protection. Jesus is the Lion of God, not the housecat of God. Be careful—a lion does not make a good housecat. Christians sometimes put Jesus in a box and defend him against all who are outside that box. You can try to keep a lion in a little cage, you cannot at the same time claim you love the lion. Christians do that because we're afraid. We're afraid that something is going to hurt the lion. I have good news: the lion doesn't need our protection. As ferocious and free as a lion, God has the power and dominion to raise Christ from the dead and the freedom to pulsate through this crowd of people called Pleasant Hill Church. God has, we are promised, put all things under Christ's feet, and Jesus does not need our protection. Back off, Saul. Just chill.

Ever been completely dedicated to protecting true faith and Christian values against "those kind", only to discover that "those kind" were among God's beloved friends? Is it possible there's a tiny bit of us in this story of Saul?

Maybe this story isn't about Saul. Maybe the story is about God, and Saul is merely a supporting role. In fact, it may be one in a series of stories about God growing bigger and bigger. Go back a chapter; in Acts 8 you find Christ-followers running for their lives because of Saul. Philip goes to Samaria and starts talking there about Jesus. The Samaritans were the black sheep of Israel's family. They were the cousin who has bad

breath and zero social skills. Through Philip, God touches Samaritans, people who were part of the family, but “not like us.”

Then he immediately runs into an Ethiopian eunuch on the side of the road. By the end of the paragraph, the Ethiopian eunuch is baptized. Ethiopian—he’s racially different; eunuch—he’s sexually different as well. The boundary of God’s limits just got stretched a whole bunch.

Then Saul, in chapter nine. Saul, breathing threats and murder against Christians. Saul, on the outskirts of Damascus, which is today the capital of Syria. Imagine terrorism practiced in Syria in the name of religion! Saul is the chief terrorist. Seven verses later, Saul is on his way to being an apostle of Christ. God embraces people who terrorize the good guys! People who practice violence against believers—Jesus says, “Hey, I’ve got this,” and draws Saul into his arms.

In the next chapter, it’s a Roman Centurion, a member of the occupying forces, a person who is part of the systemic harassment and cruelty. This time Peter is the one sent to befriend this soldier, to have dinner in his house of all things! Pshew! There Peter learns this guy is devout, generous, and a man of prayer. Welcome to the family of faith, Roman. The tribal image of us-against-them is being shattered. Why do Christians so often sound like “us and them”? In story after story, Acts is telling us that whenever we draw a circle around the people of God and “those” people, the circle is too small. It can never be about “us vs. them”. It is about oneness.

In this series of short stories, God is widening the circle of influence of Christ by widening the circle of welcome offered by God’s people. The wider the circle, the weirder the population; there are apparently no limits to those God wants included. It seems that the more uncomfortable we are about people, the more God wants them! What are these stories saying about your circle of friends? Is God wanting you to enlarge that circle?

If so, you’re going to have work at it. Because “welcome” is not a passive verb. If I slip into neutral and don’t pay attention, I will find myself gravitating towards people my own race, my own age bracket, my own economic level, and my own political opinions. And I will think these are stories of how to get saved rather than stories of what God wants me to do concerning my friends.

Who are you uncomfortable around? God called Philip, then Saul, then Peter to move out of their comfort zone; that same Spirit of God is calling you. Perhaps with a gentle nudge on the backside, perhaps with a blinding light in the middle of the road. Our

own community has grown so diverse, with so many different kinds of people who are now our neighbors. Let's intentionally, deliberately love our neighbors.

I'm not telling you to take Jesus out to these people. Sometimes Christians think we have to deliver Jesus to the world, like UPS. Like, "where do you want me to put him? He's heavy, so lift with your legs, not your back." Our job is not to take Jesus to strange people but to connect with strange people, welcome them into our circle and discover Jesus already there!. Then we simply describe what we discover

Oh, man! If you're an introvert like me, this is a hard message! I just don't naturally jump into a room full of strangers and get energized by starting conversations. But even as an introvert, I can venture a little outside my comfort zone. Not just because it'll turn out to be fun, but in the name of Christ.

People say this church is a warm, welcoming place. Visitors observe that we have lots of diversity worshipping here. So this is a safe place for you to practice widening your circle. Learn the name of a couple of teenagers; or if you're a teenager, start a conversation with someone old enough to be your grandparent. If you're a white, southern-born American, don't sit near a black-skinned or brown-skinned or Asian without saying hello. Find *anybody* you don't already know and shake hands, maybe have a cup of coffee, engage in a conversation about anything other than Donald Trump! This is a safe place to try it. I've been here over thirty years. Not once have I seen anyone bitten, slapped, or attacked because they were friendly. Out there, people might think you were coming on to them; here they think, "This is such a friendly church! I like it!"

Practice widening your circle here where it's safe. Then you'll feel more confident going into all the world, taking the gospel to every creature, making disciples in Christ's name. Well.. you may or may not make disciples, but if these stories in Acts are true, you will find Jesus in every creature.

And God in heaven will look down on you and smile. Jesus will maybe put his arm around Paul's shoulder and say, "Sorry about the blinding light; it may have been a little too bright." Paul will say, "It was worth it. Look at what those people are doing in your name."

Amen.

