

## "Persecuting Jesus"

*Acts 9:1-20*

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April 18, 2010

Saul of Tarsus, better known to us as the apostle Paul, never saw the actual face of Jesus. On the road to Damascus he saw a "light from heaven" and he heard "a voice," but he did not see Jesus' face. He only saw Jesus in the faces of those who were "in Christ," those he later described as "the body of Christ." Yet these were the very people he first persecuted!

Perhaps Saul caught his first glimpse of Jesus when the disciple, Stephen, was murdered and martyred. We are told in *The Acts of the Apostles* that Stephen was dragged outside the city and stoned to death "and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul" (7:58). As he was being stoned, Stephen forgave his persecutors from the ground, just as Jesus forgave his persecutors from the cross. He "cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him" (7:60-8:1).

At his weakest moment the disciple Stephen followed what is (for many) the most difficult teaching of Jesus: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt. 5:43-45). **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.** It is difficult enough and dangerous enough to love those who love us, to love those who seem deserving of love; however, it is near impossible to love *and* pray for those who would kill us. We share Ananias' skepticism. Yet *this* is the way of Jesus.

Last week in El Salvador, we had the opportunity to view the places where Monsenor Oscar Romero and many others were murdered

and martyred for being in solidarity with the poor. We walked through museums that displayed photos, paintings and drawings of the martyred. Their personal affects, and even some of the clothing they were wearing when they were shot, were also displayed-watches, eye-glasses, bath robes, day planners, stoles, communion supplies. These were the faces of Jesus; and when we heard the stories it was difficult to even consider forgiving their murderers. Some of us had a good discussion about this-how we would feel if we/our loved ones had been murdered and whether or not we would ever forgive-and all I could say was that that is the way of Jesus, it is the way to the kingdom of God. Love and pray, especially for your enemies.

So God answers Stephen's bold prayer for Saul, while he is on his way to Damascus. The Lord does not hold Saul's sins against him. Instead he turns this "sword" into a "plowshare," confronting him with a startling question, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). Why do you persecute *me*? Not *them*, but *me*? So much does Jesus identify with his disciples (and they with him), that **to persecute the church is to persecute Jesus himself**. And Saul had no idea, no concept of this until that moment. "He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" (Acts 9:5). At that moment, Stephen's face and the faces of all the murdered and martyred, likely rushed through Saul's mind, and the light of that revelation-the revelation that he had, in fact, been persecuting *Jesus*-temporarily blinds him. It takes more than physical sight to see what Saul had begun to see. And there is yet more to see.

Consider Jesus' vision of the great judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. In those verses Jesus makes it clear that-whether or not we give food to the hungry, whether or not we give drink to the thirsty, whether or not we welcome the stranger, whether or not we clothe the naked, whether or not we care for the sick, and whether or not we visit those in prison-it is as if we had or had not done it to him. So much does Jesus identify with the poor, that **to neglect and/or persecute the poor is to neglect and/or persecute Jesus himself**.

So **there is no room in the kingdom of God to persecute anyone**-not those who are persecutors, not those within the church, not those outside of the church. Jesus loves and prays for every murderer,

every malicious dictator, every child molester, every hate-filled heart. Jesus *is* every woman denied ordination, every gay man and woman denied ordination and marriage, every sexually abused child, every martyr. And Jesus is every-one else. To begin to see Jesus in the faces of our brothers and sisters-those within the church and those outside of the church-*this* is the beginning of the kingdom of God. Perhaps the heart of Saul's conversion (and our conversion) to the kingdom of God is the ability to see Jesus in others.

A couple of weeks ago, as I anticipated our trip to El Salvador, I pondered the question, "What does Christ look like in El Salvador?" And most mornings during my time there began with the reading of this prayer:

Christ, as a light  
illumine and guide me.  
Christ, as a shield  
overshadow me.  
Christ under me;  
Christ over me;  
Christ beside me  
on my left and my right.  
This day be within and without me,  
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.  
Be in the heart of each to whom I speak;  
in the mouth of each who speaks unto me.  
This day be within and without me,  
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.  
Christ as a light;  
Christ as a shield;  
Christ beside me  
on my left and my right.

And every day this prayer was answered. To my right and to my left-Christ in the face of a beautiful, curious, little girl named Lupita; Christ in the strong, determined, young man named Jonathan; Christ in the compassionate, generous, loving church named Iglesia Bautista Dios Compasivo; Christ in my hardworking, loving, and sometimes tired brothers and sisters from Dayton and Springfield, Ohio.

In those times I learned (on a deeper level) that to seek to know Christ in every person we meet is to seek constant transformation. For every time we encounter the risen Lord in the face of another, we are forever changed. **In this way we will experience a lifetime of conversions to the kingdom of God each time we are able to see Christ in the face of another.** Some encounters will change the course of our lives dramatically, and other will do so more gradually, almost imperceptibly. Still, as we find Christ in others, we will also be found "in Christ," and "anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old has passed away; everything has become new" (2 Cor. 5:17)

On the morning we left El Salvador, our group, along with our American Baptist missionary and friend, Kim Kushner, and our driver and friend, Jonathan, joined together in a time of prayer. And I prayed something like this: "God you were here before us, you will be here after we leave, and you are waiting for us back home. I thank you for the times when my heart was "strangely warmed" and I knew your presence and I saw your face. Thank you."

I am convinced that as we are able to see Christ among us, we will cease to neglect and persecute others; and we will begin to feed, clothe, house, and seek justice for everyone-near and far. We can do nothing less, for as it is written, ".those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 Jn. 4:20-21). It is as the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

*[.] the just [one] justices;  
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is-  
Chríst-for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of [people's] faces.*

So this morning and every day, look to your left and to your right, within and without, where Christ is waiting to be seen, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!