

Ecclesia Spiritus

Part 1: Ecclesia of Misfits Acts 9:1-20

We begin a new series today called Ecclesia Spiritus, the church of the spirit. In this series we explore how the early Christian community formed itself around both the memory of Jesus and their ongoing relationship with him as Holy Spirit. We will look at certain conceptions of Jesus and see how they were lived out in the early community. We'll look at misconceptions about the church and Christian faith. What, there are misconceptions? And we'll see how closer attention to certain ancient understandings of Jesus correct those misconceptions.

Part 1: Clang, Clang!

The Bible is full of stories about unlikely, ordinary people doing extraordinary things for God and the world. Wait, I think the last time I preached that was exactly my message. Remember Rogue One? Do you remember what I said about Paul? I don't either. You could say these people who are totally unqualified to lead people and change the world are misfits, like the island of misfit toys from Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. That is actually the power of the early church (and maybe of the church today); that God's pleasure and creativity and love are made known by working through the not expected to bring about the kingdom of God.

This story is about the conversion of Saul from absolute enemy of Jesus to one of his most sincere followers. By the way, Saul becomes Paul in Acts 13:9, "Saul, who was also called Paul..." We know that Paul was a Roman citizen, born to a devout Jewish family. He was a Pharisee of the religious ruling class and his job was to persecute disciples of Jesus, killing and torturing anyone who he could find that was following Jesus. I don't think that Paul would be considered a misfit. He is a Roman citizen, a Pharisee, as it says in Philippians 3 "of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews". But, there is one way in which he is a misfit. He is an absolute enemy of the church and of Jesus. This scene on the way to Damascus is a huge Clang for Paul and he's blinded by light and knocked off his, well he was probably on a horse. This was a monumental call for Paul, an experience that is a foundation that will stay with him the rest of his life. Anyone ever have one of those?

So, what is his extraordinary contribution to the church or the world? Within the next 10 or 15 years, this enemy of the church goes on to turn the church upside down by insisting that non-Jewish people are just as Christian as Jewish people. He was basically making the church open and affirming right there in about 50 A.D. That would be like if Osama Bin Laden became the leader of the Christian Church in America, and not only led it but changed it into what it is really supposed to be. Would you trust him? Paul led the charge to accept all people into the church. He opened new churches and wrote to churches, encouraging them to live in love. He was probably the most influential leader the church has ever seen. So it was not only a huge Clang experience for Paul, but also for the church throughout history. Imagine if Paul had not stood up to the church leaders and called for change. What requirements would we have had to go through to join or be welcomed as an equal member?

Part 2: ching, ching

There's another character in this story that plays an important role in the history of the church and that is Ananias. He is called by God to go and meet Saul, but Ananias is afraid because he knows the reputation of Saul. He was probably busily hiding from him for fear of his life. He knows that he can be arrested by meeting him and then probably killed. But he goes and says to Saul, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And then Ananias simply laid his hand on Saul and something like scales fell from his eyes and he was filled with the spirit. And, this was the end of Ananias's job. Thank you very much.

Different than Paul's experience of Clang that brought him to his knees and blinded him, Ananias's call was more of ching, a small request for a small job that did not require much more than an overcoming of fear to perform. He said one sentence and put his hand on him. That's it. I'm sure Ananias did not think it was some small act to face a man who was known to be an enemy, killing people like him. I'm sure he was super upset about the request. For some reason this is God's way of changing the world. God could just zap people into being difference makers, but that's not how the system works. God works through people to get to other people. Why did God need Ananias to do that little thing so that Paul's life could be entirely refocused? Well, I'm not sure God needed Ananias to do that, but that's the way it works.

Consider a small act that you feel in your gut that you should do. Maybe something moves you and you want to respond out of a sense of compassion or a sense of calling. But, there is a fear in it, that you will waste your time or that you will be made fun of or that it won't amount to anything. Maybe that's how the spirit works in our lives, to give us an intuition to do some small seemingly random act that we may not be excited to do, but we know we should do.

I have a couple of things to say about these two calls. First is that I don't think these are once in a lifetime calls. I have had the Clang experience at least three times in my life. These were monumental moments when the experience of God was overwhelming and they have been foundations in my life that I can look back on and distinctly know that I had an experience with God that changed my perspective on life, the spiritual journey, and on me. In all of these, there was an overwhelming sense of peace and love. And I have had countless experiences of the ching, those small moments when, being aware of my intuitions and listening to them, I have followed that leading and have been amazed at how the circumstance played out, thinking I'm so glad I listened to that and did it. The second thing is that we all get a combination of the Clang and the ching, but we have to listen or be open to it or get knocked off our horse.

Today is Confirmation Sunday and we realize that we have the exciting experience of waiting in expectation to see what these students will do to change the world or change the church. We know that God uses the unlikely to further the kingdom, so it may be sooner than we think. So we encourage our Confirmands to be open to the leading of God through intuition, through

nature, or through the way in which they see their path coming together for a purpose. And sometimes we only see the hand of God when we look back.

I grew up in the church and went through Confirmation in my 7th & 8th grade years. Then in 9th grade we had to meet every Monday afternoon in the Senior Pastor's office. We had to memorize the catechism and present a five minute sermon on Confirmation Sunday. It was a serious program. I was the kind of guy that went along. I did what I was supposed to do, not unwillingly, but not because it was my passion. I played the role of the good Christian boy and Confirmation for me was just another day at church, a scary day, but one of the days of my path. It wasn't until a few years later that I would take my faith seriously.

As Chris shared about her Confirmation story, that was the last day she was at church and now she's an associate pastor in a church. Warning...if you walk away after today, you may wind up as a pastor!