

“Loving the real you”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Acts 9:1-20

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Let’s talk about stories. The stories we tell about each other, about ourselves. The story of who’s nice and who’s mean, who’s poor and who’s rich, who’s smart and who’s dumb—and of course, the kicker, the one that defines so much of politics, and religion, and high school: who’s bad and who’s good.

Several years ago, a show aired on Netflix that was about the stories families concoct to define themselves. I bet everyone here can easily tell me who, among your siblings, is the responsible one (given that you are in a Presbyterian church this morning, there’s a good chance it’s you), the rebellious one, the uptight one, the fun one. You have in your head a story about each of your family, a story that tries to makes sense of them and you. That’s where the show “Bloodline” begins—with a family whose story seems almost perfect.

You’ve got the dad who rose out of poverty to build a resort in paradise. The mom who keeps the family together with her love. The son who’s a police officer, always helping and taking care of everyone else. The fiery, young son who’s fun and loyal. The lawyer daughter who’s the peacemaker. They are a good family. Their name—and the story behind that name—means something in their community. But of course, even good families have ones who go astray. In this case, it’s the oldest son who shows up late after being gone for years, the one who ran off and thinks only about himself, who drinks and uses drugs, who hangs out with the “wrong” kind of people, who flits from one thing to the next. In this family’s story, he’s the bad guy, the one who took their other daughter when she was just a child out on the boat, and led to a tragic accident and her death.

What about you? What’s your story? Are you one of the good guys, or bad?

When we first meet Saul in the Book of Acts, we know his story: he’s a bad guy. He’s part of the mob who kills Stephen, the first martyr of the church. The chapter right before ours begins, “And Saul approved of their killing him.” Saul is the ringleader of a conspiracy to persecute, arrest, and attack followers of Jesus, dragging men and women from their homes and throwing them into prison. The Bible’s language is visceral; it says Saul is “breathing threats and murder.” So, we’re not surprised, when Christ tells Ananias to go to Saul, Ananias says: *Surely not him! He’s the enemy!*

Even after his conversion, people still can’t believe that Christ chose Saul to be his apostle. It just doesn’t fit the story. When he shows up in Jerusalem and tries to join the disciples, they are afraid of him; they think he’s a fraud; he can’t possibly be a disciple. He’s a bad guy!

That’s the problem with stories. They always seem to leave something out.

As the show “Bloodline” unfolds, the story of the good family with the bad son begins to unravel. When his sister died, he was just a teenager, trying to comfort a little girl, whose mother was on the brink of abandoning them all, and whose father—as usual—was absent. And when his father found out about the accident, he beat his son, breaking bones, and the whole family did nothing to stop it. They lied to the police about it; made up a story about a car accident. And yeah, all those things we said about the son—his poor judgment, his selfishness, his vindictiveness—they’re all true. But sometimes he really was trying to care for others and do good. And all his good siblings? They lie, they betray, they have affairs, they hurt people. They are so much more complicated than their story.

When Christ encounters Saul on that road to Damascus, he doesn’t see a story; he sees a person. He sees the good and the bad and everything in between. He doesn’t condemn; he just states the fact: you’re persecuting me, you’re hurting people, this is a part of who you are, this fundamentalism, this legalism, this violence. But knowing that, Jesus chooses Saul anyway. Because it’s not all of who Saul is. Saul is also a thoughtful, faithful, passionate person who wants to serve God and do the right thing. These two truths co-exist in him: the sinner and the saint. Jesus forgives the one, and releases the other. He forgives, just as Stephen asked, who while dying, cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). And he releases the good, saying, “For he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.”

Jesus looks upon Saul, and loves all of him. He loves the bad parts, the good parts, the parts Saul doesn’t want anyone to know about.

A lot of people think that Jesus changes Saul’s name to Paul, there on that road to Damascus. They think Jesus changed him from a bad man to a good man—rewrote his story. But that’s not what the Bible says. The Bible says that Christ addressed him as Saul, the Holy Spirit called him Saul, and that he continued to go by Saul long after his conversion. In fact, he is called Saul 11 more times.

Saul didn’t become Paul. He always had two names. Saul was a Jew born among Gentiles, and like so many other immigrants, he had his Jewish name, Saul, and he had his Latin name, Paul.

He remains Saul and Paul, a complicated man, who will, even after his conversion, describe an inner conflict, saying in Romans 7, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (7:15). The man who writes in his epistles that there is neither male nor female, who co-labors with women disciples and advances the equality of the gospel, is the same man who says women shouldn’t speak in church and should be subordinate to men, the same guy who reinforces two millennia of religious oppression of women.

That story doesn’t make sense—unless Saul isn’t a story; he’s a child of God, a contradictory mess of good and bad, whose defining trait isn’t whether he’s a villain or a superhero; it’s that Jesus loves him. All of him.

Jesus was always doing this—loving and calling complicated people. All of Scripture is an honest testimony to God’s love of their real selves; Scripture does not hide David’s murder, or Moses’ indecision, or Jacob’s theft, or Abraham’s dishonesty, or Peter’s betrayal, or even Jesus’ anger.

We work so hard to tell these stories about ourselves and others—who’s good, who’s bad. Sometimes we’re so convinced that we are good that we fail to see the bad we do. And sometimes we’re so convinced that we’re bad that we fail to see the good we do. These stories become cages.

Long ago, in Damascus, Christ broke that cage for Saul and Ananias. And he offers to do the same for us today. He invites us to face our real self, the one we hide, the one we fear, the one that’s messy and complicated, the stubborn, selfish, prejudiced, hurtful, kind, selfless, loving, creative people we are.

We are not the good people we pretend to be. Quoting the Psalms, Paul says, “There is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). We are also not the bad people we fear we are. No matter what you’ve done, you are not a monster. We are an amalgam. A gray. A dusk. We are the messy children of God. And the good news is that God sees it all and loves it all.

As Sirius Black says to Harry Potter, “The world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters. We’ve all got both light and dark inside us.” Jesus came because he believed in both parts of us: the sinner and the image of God. He came to forgive the one, and to release, empower, the other.

1 John 3:1: “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

Can we love with a love like that? Can we love each other and ourselves, not as we pretend to be, not as we fear we are, but as we simply are, the fullness of ourselves, the good and the bad, all of it? Because there is One who already has. Who has seen us at our worst, and loved us still. Even when we couldn’t. Even when we thought we were beyond love. And who has seen us at our best and never forgotten.

Here is a love that asks no Instagram filter, no story, no perfection; a love that sees you as you truly are, flawed, beautiful you, and does not run away, does not divide us into good guys and bad guys, but sweeps us all—every last one of us, every last crucifier—into its arms and loves us like the wounded children we are. Love us all the way to salvation. **Amen.**