

Take My Hand
(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, April 18, 2010)

Acts 9:1-19 (TEV) ¹In the meantime Saul kept up his violent threats of murder against the followers of the Lord. He went to the High Priest ²and asked for letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he should find there any followers of the Way of the Lord, he would be able to arrest them, both men and women, and bring them back to Jerusalem. ³As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?" ⁵"Who are you, Lord?" he asked. "I am Jesus, whom you persecute," the voice said. ⁶"But get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you must do."

⁷The men who were traveling with Saul had stopped, not saying a word; they heard the voice but could not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground and opened his eyes, but could not see a thing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was not able to see, and during that time he did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰There was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. He had a vision, in which the Lord said to him, "Ananias!" "Here I am, Lord," he answered. ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get ready and go to Straight Street, and at the house of Judas ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying, ¹²and in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come in and place his hands on him so that he might see again." ¹³Ananias answered, "Lord, many people have told me about this man and about all the terrible things he has done to your people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come to Damascus with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who worship you." ¹⁵The Lord said to him, "Go, because I have chosen him to serve me, to make my name known to Gentiles and kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶And I myself will show him all that he must suffer for my sake."

¹⁷So Ananias went, entered the house where Saul was, and placed his hands on him. "Brother Saul," he said, "the Lord has sent me—Jesus himself, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here. He sent me so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸At once something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he was able to see again. He stood up and was baptized; ¹⁹and after he had eaten, his strength came back.

John 21:1-19 (TEV) ¹After this, Jesus appeared once more to his disciples at Lake Tiberias. This is how it happened. ²Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael (the one from Cana in Galilee), the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples of Jesus were all together. ³Simon Peter said to the others, "I am going fishing." "We will come with you," they told him. So they went out in a boat, but all that night they did not catch a thing.

⁴As the sun was rising, Jesus stood at the water's edge, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Then he asked them, "Young men, haven't you caught anything?" "Not a thing," they answered. ⁶He said to them, "Throw your net out on the right side of the boat, and you will catch some." So they threw the net out and could not pull it back in, because they had caught so many fish.

⁷The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Peter heard that it was the Lord, he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken his clothes off) and jumped into the water. ⁸The other disciples came to shore in the boat, pulling the net full of fish. They were not very far from land, about a hundred yards away. ⁹When they stepped ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there with fish on it and some bread. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net ashore full of big fish, a hundred and fifty-three in all; even though there were so many, still the net did not tear. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and eat." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³So Jesus went over, took the bread, and gave it to them; he did the same with the fish.

¹⁴This, then, was the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from death. ¹⁵After they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" "Yes, Lord," he answered, "you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my lambs."

¹⁶A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," he answered, "you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep."

¹⁷A third time Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter became sad because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" and so he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!" Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep. ¹⁸I am telling you the truth: when you were young, you used to get ready and go anywhere you wanted to; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you up and take you where you don't want to go." ¹⁹(In saying this, Jesus was indicating the way in which Peter would die and bring glory to God.) Then Jesus said to him, "Follow me!"

A story is told about a Buddhist holy man who came to New York City on a visit, and while there he decided to engage in that great American tradition, he bought a hot dog from a vendor on the street corner. He handed the vendor a \$20 bill and waited, and waited, and finally asked, “Where’s my change?” The vendor, who was familiar with Buddhist philosophy, replied, “All change must come from within.”

We might chuckle at this story, but in a sense, don’t we agree with this philosophy? Don’t we like to think that we can do whatever we put our mind to doing? Don’t we like to think of ourselves as strong-willed, independent people? But on the other hand, how often have you tried to do something and just couldn’t do it alone? This is especially true if we try to change something about ourselves. Ask anyone who has struggled to rid themselves of any kind of dependency habit, whether that be smoking, alcohol or narcotics, and they will tell you that they need to rely on a higher power, and on other people to encourage and support them. Or on another level, have you ever made a New Year’s resolution to change something about yourself? How did that work out? Some folks can bring about change, but most such resolutions end up discarded. The truth is: change cannot come just from within. We need help to change the way we are. And the greater the change, the greater help we need. For truly transforming change, as recognized by all of the 12-step programs, we need help from a higher power, we need help from God. And even then, we may need an additional helping hand from friends, from other people.

Most of us have heard the story of Saul’s dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. God certainly got Saul’s attention – a blinding light, a voice from heaven, so overpowering that it knocked Saul to the ground. But then, when Saul stood up – what happened next? He couldn’t see, so his traveling companions had to take him by the hand, and lead him to the town of Damascus.

Of course the conversion of Saul is not the only conversion story in the New Testament. I sometimes think we overlook some of the other stories because they are not as dramatic. Consider Peter, for example. How often did Peter head off in the wrong direction, doing the wrong thing, and had to be corrected, sometimes rebuked, by our Lord? He tried to tell Jesus not to go to Jerusalem, and Jesus told him, “Get behind me, Satan.” He tried to tell Jesus not to wash his feet, and when Jesus told him it had to be so, in order to have a share with him, Peter asked him to wash his whole body – and again Jesus had to correct him. He tried to defend Jesus with his sword when the temple police came into the garden, and Jesus told him to “put it away.” He insisted that he would never deny Jesus, and Jesus told him that he would do it three times before morning. Can this be the same Peter who preached that powerful sermon in the home of Cornelius, saying, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” Peter the disciple certainly had to change his thinking and his actions, to become Peter the Apostle, a leader of the Apostles.

But again, notice that this was not just a change that God brought on him. Peter, just like Saul, after his revelation, his dream, had to be led to his assignment in the home of Cornelius, although Peter wasn’t blind. There were men there who asked him to come with them, and they led him to the home of Cornelius in Caesarea. I wonder if Jesus was trying to tell him this was going to happen in our Gospel lesson. Jesus told Peter that he would go anywhere he wanted as a young man, but when he was old, he would stretch out his hands and someone would take him where he didn’t want to go. That not only happens when we are old, but sometimes even when we are young, things happen where someone leads us where we do not want to go. I don’t think Peter wanted to go to the home of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile and Peter even reminded Cornelius that it was unlawful for Jews to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God got his attention in a dream, and the men came from Cornelius to lead him, and Peter went to a place where a righteous Jew did not want to go, was forbidden to go.

Ananias didn’t want to go to Straight Street to meet this fellow Saul from Tarsus. He knew all about the terrible things Saul was doing to the believers, and he knew that Saul brought papers to arrest any believers he found. But God told him to go, and he listened and he obeyed. And when he came to the house where Saul was staying, he had to reach out his hands, and touch Saul, this man who we were told was breathing fire against the believers. Could you have reached out to touch him? And if you would have, what would you have expected? God used Ananias’ touch to restore Saul’s sight. God used Ananias’ touch to bring Saul to baptism into the church. It was not so much what Ananias did, but how God could use that touch from Ananias to bring the conversion of Saul to the fruitful conclusion.

We can’t do it on our own – nobody can bring about transforming change from within. But God can bring about that kind of change. And sometimes God uses us to touch, to lead, to guide others into transformation. So don’t be afraid to reach out and touch. Reach so others can take you by the hand, and be ready to reach out your hands to touch another, and be a channel for God’s grace and God’s transforming power. Amen.