

Covenant Presbyterian Church

“Showing the Way” Acts 9:10-19 and Mark 10:46-52

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The passage that we’re about to read comes amidst one of the most famous and important conversion stories in the Bible. It is perhaps the most pivotal moment in Christian history outside of the life of Christ himself. Acts 9 starts, dramatically, with this phrase “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem”. This story starts with one of the biggest enemies of Jesus followers and it details the ways in which he ended up being one of his strongest believers. While on the way to Damascus to imprison Christians he was struck by a bright light from heaven and a voice saying “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” The voice of Jesus called him into Damascus, but he was blinded by a light and had to be led by hand into Damascus. This is the backdrop for the story we’re going to hear. A blinded zealot enters Damascus in order to bring ruination to the Christians in the city.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision [\[a\]](#) a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” ¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name

before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul ^[b] and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus

This remarkable story ends with Saul being rechristened as Paul, who later went on to have a prolific career in church founding and letter writing. Indeed, this story is the conversion story of Paul, who helped birth the Christian church, who went from one of its most zealous persecutors to its most zealous proponents. This passage is one of significant consequence for the church. It shows that God uses even the most violent opponents to good ends and shows the power of Christ to compel people to repentance. It also shows the ways in which God places people in dangerous and unpredictable situations. Look at what happened with Saul, he approached a city with all the power in the world. He came in as an inquisitor looking to persecute. He was “breathing threats and murder”. And before he marched into town to commit his awful deeds, he was literally knocked over by the very person he was coming to persecute, and then dedicated his life to service.

But this story is not just the story of Paul’s conversion. It’s also the story of a faithful servant who risked danger and helped birth the church. This is also the story of a man named Ananias, who went to Saul, welcomed him like a brother, helped open his eyes, and helped lead him to serve the kingdom. Ananias was a faithful servant who lived in Damascus and who God asked to lay hands on Saul. Ananias knows nothing about what happened on the road. All he knows is that Saul’s not a good guy to people like him, but after being encouraged by god, he

goes and returns sight to Saul. Ananias' name is mentioned only a handful of times in the entire Bible, and not much is known about him. He's not a famous character, but he is important to the story of Christianity. Without Ananias, or someone else like him, then Paul would never have recovered his sight, he would not have seen the folly of his life prior, he would not have gone on to provide for the foundation of the church that we know today. Could God have opened Saul's eyes without Ananias laying hands? Yes. Definitely. We're talking about God here, and if God can equip Ananias to do this, then certainly God could have done it solo. But God didn't open Saul's eyes, God brought Ananias to Saul to open his eyes and give him a companion in learning. This is an important thing to remember as we think about our church's vision for 2020. During October, we are focusing our sermons on our 2020 vision, and the way in which our eyes are open to what our future looks like. Last week Charlie talked about how our eyes are opened to some of the issues in our world, by our support of global mission partnerships. He talked about the work that we're supporting in Guatemala, Peru, South Sudan, Kenya, and others. Today we are talking about how our eyes are opened to the needs of the Madison community.

Last week we read the story of Jesus healing Bartimaeus that we heard again today. In this story, Jesus comes to Bartimaeus and heals him of his blindness. Jesus restores sight to Bartimaeus and that is one prayer for Covenant this season, that God would open our eyes to the world and to our neighbor. But in reading the story of Ananias this week, I'm also praying that we find ways to have our neighbor open our eyes to God. I'm not saying that we're Saul. We aren't the church on the corner 'breathing threats and murder'. We aren't persecuting or threatening or riding into Madison with a letter that will allow us to round up the non-believers. But still, there are areas in which we may have blind spots. And that's ok. No church, no institution, can have the full picture of the whole of any context. It is to that end that we need to be on the look out for Ananias as he knocks on our door. And for a church like us, Ananias can look like many different

things, can come to us in many different ways. For us to look for Ananias, we need to look for the needs of the Madison community. We need to find ways, like Paul, to pursue God's kingdom after having our eyes opened.

So how does that happen? How do we recognize Ananais when he knocks on our door? A lot of the time it looks like a member of the church bringing a new idea to the community and the church acts on this idea. I saw this in action this past summer. After worship one Sunday I had a member of the church mention that she gives blood regularly. I responded that I hadn't given blood in a while and missed doing so. The following week I got an email from her that said "I just contacted the Red Cross. I could organize a blood drive at church...There is a process. What do you think?" So in August we hosted a blood drive at the church for the first time. The results of this drive were incredible. We collected 33 pints of blood and registered a staggering 24 first time donors. It opened my eyes to the need for blood in our community, and for those 24 first time donors hopefully opened their eyes to the possibility to give blood again in the future. In a follow up email, I was informed that a pint of my blood was sent to the UW hospital, so that means somewhere in the Madison community someone is walking around with a little bit of Covenant in them, which never would have happened if we didn't remain open to new possibilities. In this case, our eyes were opened by a member who saw something that we, as a community, didn't yet see. Our eyes were opened to the possibilities within us.

Our eyes are also opened when we have our mission partners approach us with their needs. Do you know what I don't spend a lot of time thinking about? The need for healthy snacks. This isn't because I don't like healthy food, but rather because I have ready access to healthy food. Glenn Stephens Elementary is our partner elementary school and we're blessed that they can open our eyes to what is happening with the youngest people in our community. Every month of the school year we bring over a load of healthy snacks – enough that every student in

the school gets something healthy to snack on. Just this past Monday we brought 538 apples to the school. And we connect with the school in other ways, such as our pen pal program, which has opened my eyes and helped me and other members to meet interesting and wonderful students that we'd otherwise have no way of knowing. And just this past week, Clara participated in the Principal Experience, shadowing Sarah GG for a day in the life!

We are blessed in Madison to have a wealth of places that can open our eyes to the needs of the community. Recently, two of our mission partners Madison Area Urban Ministries and The Road Home, have collaborated on a new project called "Healing House". Healing house is a medical respite center for people who are discharged from the hospital but don't have anywhere to go. These people (often children recovering from surgeries, or moms who just gave birth) are given a chance to stay in Healing House for up to 28 days to help them recover in a safe, warm environment. They are opening the eyes of the Madison community to the needs of very vulnerable populations. We are lucky to partner with them as we have started preparing meals at healing house for the residents

At Covenant we're blessed to have regular opportunities to serve, to have our eyes opened to the needs of our community. Twice a year we serve food to the college community of Pres House. Through our serving with that community, our eyes are opened up to the good work that God is doing at the University of Wisconsin and in the lives of our neighbors at the school. Every other month we serve food at Grace Episcopal shelter and we have started serving community meals at the Triangle Apartments, a low-income housing community. In fact, on Monday October 21st a group of us will be going to Triangle and as of this moment there are currently only two slots open for you to sign up for if you're feeling up for a fun time doing good with great folks. If you want to serve, but by the time you get to the sign up, let me know and I'll make sure to reach out to you first next time we serve there.

And it's not just the adults in the congregation whose eyes are opened to the good things happening in Madison. The youth in this congregation are active in addressing the needs of the community. Here are some pictures of the youth serving at the River Food Pantry – they just went back there this past Friday. We give thanks for that partner to help open our eyes to the issues of hunger in our community. The children also are involved in many projects in our community, including participating in Project Linus, making blankets for children who are in the hospital. We'll be making more blankets on November 3rd, a great opportunity for children and adults to open our eyes.

In Madison, we are blessed to be surrounded by people like Ananias, willing to reach out to us to open our eyes to the great things that are happening in this city and to open our eyes to the needs of our neighbors. During October, we are asking everyone to consider making a monetary pledge to the church. This pledge helps support our operating budget, a good portion of which goes to support the organizations previously mentioned, and many more. But this is also a time to pledge ourselves to doing God's work in our community. It is a time to pledge that we will look around with open eyes at the potential for good work and kingdom-building. Whether that pledge is to do so within the Covenant community, or in your life outside of this building, I pray that we stay alert for others to open our eyes to what God is doing. Like Saul, we are occasionally blinded, and we all need help to open our eyes. Listen to the voices of your neighbors, listen to your siblings here in this building, listen to the work being done by organizations that need support. Then, with eyes open, go out and serve the Lord. Make this community healthier, stronger, better.