

February 2 2014

Scripture Lessons ~ Micah 6:1-8

Galatians 1:11-24

Sermon *God Isn't Finished with Me Yet*

I am pretty certain that all of you have somewhere along the line seen a wall hanging which reads “Be patient with me –God isn’t finished with me yet” I should have that printed on my forehead for all to see every day. And I think this could have been said by St. Paul before his Damascus Road experiences as well as we read in this letter to the Galatians. In today’s lesson from Galatians Paul describes the before and after of his life because of the astounding change that eventually came over him. As we hear in this passage Paul’s early life was spent as a devote Jewish leader but one in a rage against Christians. He was brought up in the strictest teaching of his faith and he espoused those teaching with great zeal and for this reason he couldn’t stand to see Christians making converts one of members of the very Synagogue with which he had a relationship. He made himself into a sort of one man persecution squad as a result. He himself says he violently persecuted the church of God. The Acts of the Apostles, in fact reports that Paul was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. And in the same book of the Bible, Paul says of himself, “I not only locked up many of the saints in prison and I also cast his vote against them when they were condemned to death”. Then he adds that by punishing them often and in all the synagogues I tried to force them to seek blasphemy. And since I was furiously enraged with them I pursued them even into foreign cities. And in the most important day of his life, Paul was on his way in fact to one of those cities called Damascus armed with the authority and commission given to him by the chief priests in Jerusalem to smash the Christian movement in that city. Nobody could equal him in his zeal to eliminate the church at that time. And about that time he believe he was zealously fulfilling God’s will but now came that huge turning point in Paul’s life as the persecutor came along the road nearing Damascus God, startlingly, startlingly intervened. The

impact knocked Paul to the ground and it blinded him. And then and there, God opened a whole new truth for Paul; the truth that was to turn his life around 180 degrees. When Paul looks back on this, in the letter to the Galatians, he sees three different things that God had done in his life as a result of that experience.

First he says God has set me apart before I was born. In other words God had an important plan for Paul's life only revealed at this time which Paul could either accept or reject. The prophet Isaiah in fact was convinced when he explained in these words. The Lord called me before I was born while I was in mother's womb, God named me.

Secondly God called Paul to Jesus out of God's steadfast love. Paul said it this way, God called me through his grace. God's grace overlooked that terrible damage Paul had brought upon the church in his raging persecution. The grace of God forgave Paul's misdirected zeal.

Then in the third place Paul writes God was pleased to reveal his son to be that I might proclaim that Son among the gentiles not just the Jewish people but the gentiles as well. This was the blockbuster, the reason that Jesus appeared to Paul in a vision on that Damascus road. This was the pivotal event in Paul's life. It turned the foremost persecutor of the church into the foremost proclaimer of the good news of Jesus love. And from Paul's standpoint at that time he believed what he had seen.

God has turned many lives around in fact from a wretched before to a kind of transformation after. For example in the fourth century a man that we call St. Augustine, who had spent his early life as a person with no purpose, with no conviction in life but after his conversion in Rome, he became one of the foremost thinkers of Christianity for all time.

Remember John Newton in England who was captain of a slave ship the notorious slave trading days in the 18th century but after his conversion he wrote some of the most beautiful Christian hymns in the world including one hymn very dear to many of you, Amazing

Grace. God's Holy Spirit has accomplished many stunning miracles in what seemed like impossible situations; turning lives hostile to God's love into lives passionate in their desire to live out the good news of God's love in Jesus. I like classical music, like Shubert's Unfinished Symphony. We are also God's unfinished symphony in a sense. God is not finished with any of us yet. Oh of course the before is finished but the after is a long ways from being completed. In fact like St. Paul, we wouldn't even recognize ourselves if we saw the people that God intended for us to become in the future. There is so much more finishing work that God wants to do with each one of us. Our education and our growth as Christians never ends as long as we have breath in our bodies. The potential is always there for any person to become more the disciple that God wants him or her to become. That's why it is so important for us as a church to dedicate ourselves anew every single day to the ongoing task of learning, growing and of sharing God's love with people in every stage of our journey in faith; teach in Sunday school or Vacation school or Bible study or confirmation or Sunday sermon. We are called as Christians to continue our quest to become everything that God wants us to become.

Another tip of the hat from Mr. Meade that I learned this year, that moist lump of clay in the potters hand could not possibility recognizing itself as a finished product of a vase for example of breath taking beauty. But it sometimes goes through a painful mental process doesn't it. The potter starts by kneading that lump with his hands and feet and pressing it and then it goes on that whirling turn table at a dizzying speed. The potter applies pressure with his hands on the whirling clay in just the right places and after wards it is subjected to that intense heat in the kiln. And finally it is painted and in the end whether it is made by a child or adult it becomes an object of priceless, priceless worth.

Be patient with me; God is not finished with me yet as that sign says. Each of us in a way lives his or her life on a kind of Damascus road. As with St Paul God loving grace is seeking to transform each one of us, day and night. God's Holy Spirit is working on every molecule of our before and changing it into Jesus like afterwards. We can cooperate

in that process or we can thwart that process. Free will tells us the decision is ours to make. I am going to encourage you today to work together to make this year of growth and learning every facet of ministry of the United Church of Christ and in every facet of your individual lives as well

Together we say AMEN