

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 4, 2025

The Closed Circle of Violence

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, I did warn you last week. I remain focused on the Acts texts following Easter as opposed to the resurrection appearances. So, I'll once again draw your attention to the life of the early followers of the Way and the challenges and joys that those early communities experienced.

Our reading from Acts 9 opens with Saul “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”¹ Remember, it wasn't that long ago in Acts 7 that this zealous young man was watching people's cloaks while they were busy stoning Stephen!²

Acts 8 then opens with these verses: “And Saul approved of their killing [Stephen]. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.”³ The chapter then goes on (perhaps in contrast) to cover the spread of the Gospel in Samaria and then encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on the wilderness road.

¹ Acts 9:1b (NRSVUE)

² Acts 7:58

³ Acts 8:1-3

The next time Saul is mentioned, it is in our reading from Acts 9. Here he is still zealously persecuting and harming followers of the Way, and he does it with official sanction from the Temple authorities. This is important! Official sanction by systems of power to enact violence against others is a long-held and too-often-wielded tool in human history.

In his commentary on the Book of Acts, Willie James Jennings writes, “No one is more dangerous than one with the power to take life and who already has his mind and sight set on those who are a threat to a safe future. Such a person is a closed circle relying on the inner coherence of their logic. Their authority confirms their argument and their argument justifies their actions and their actions reinforce the appropriateness of their authority. Violence, in order to be smooth, elegant, and seemingly natural, needs people who are closed circles.”⁴

This is a powerful insight into the nature of violent systems and those who serve them. People and systems can get locked into self-justifying violence. Case in point: Saul has determined that followers of the Way are a threat to the Temple system, based on what? We don’t know. But unsurprisingly, the Temple authorities agree with him. Since they (like most systems of power) already have the means of doing violence against those that do not accept their authority (the Temple police), they have granted themselves the right to use that violence to “maintain the peace” or some such. It’s easy for them to sign some letters to the synagogues in Damascus ordering them to cooperate with Saul in his persecutions. Saul then has the stamp of approval that allows him to easily justify violence against people who have done nothing other than believe differently than he does.

Take a moment to sit with these realities described from long ago: Closed circles of violence. Self-justifying use of oppression. Zealously following

⁴ Jennings, Willie James. Acts. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017. Print. Belief; A Theological Commentary on the Bible. Pp. 90-91

orders with no regard for harm. Reinforcement of bigotry and hatred by those in authority. Any of these rings familiar today?

A couple of weeks ago ICE agents apprehended a 19-year-old in New York despite admitting he was not their intended target. The young man, Merwil Gutiérrez, was later deported to El Salvador's notorious super prison. Merwil's father reported, "The officers grabbed him and two other boys right at the entrance to our building. One said, 'No, he's not the one,' like they were looking for someone else. But the other said, 'Take him anyway,'"⁵

Closed circles of violence, unwilling to stop and even think about the evil acts being committed. Unwilling to even acknowledge a mistake! The sheer gall! I despair sometimes at how easy it is for us humans to commit such evil as long as we have approval from some "higher" authority.

Well, Saul's approval gets overridden. Jesus interrupts the closed circle of Saul's self-justifying violence in a way he cannot ignore. Overwhelming him with the reality of the harm he is causing. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁶ According to Pamela Eisenbaum, "Why are you hurting me?" is a more accurate translation of the words Paul hears.⁷

Jesus, God's very Son, is identifying with the persecuted and harmed in a powerful and intimate way. God should not know pain, and yet in Christ, God knows the pain of those being thrown in prison. Being ripped away from family and friends. God knows isolation, loneliness, and despair. And God confronts Saul with it. To help those he's persecuting, sure, but also to help Saul! People in a closed circle not only gravely endanger vulnerable people but they themselves are sentenced to a life of serving violence and death.

⁵ <https://www.newsweek.com/merwil-gutierrez-ice-wrong-teen-el-salvador-2059783>

⁶ Acts 9:4b (NRSVUE)

⁷ Eisenbaum, Pamela. *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*. New York: HarperOne, 2009.

Breaking closed circles involves a great deal of risk. But is exactly what Jesus does for Saul in our reading today. And it's part of the call for us followers of the Way too. We are called to do what we can to interrupt and break closed circles. We do this by taking a stand with those who are being harmed and oppressed.

So followers of the Way speak out on behalf of Abrego Garcia and Merwil Gutiérrez and countless others who are now in prison for simply seeking asylum in our country. We speak out on behalf of Mahmoud Khalil and others who are in prison for speaking out on behalf of the victims of the genocide in Gaza. We speak out, calling attention to the self-justifying, closed circles of violence doing untold harm to people right now. We speak out by saying this is not loving, this is not kind, this is not just, this is not the Way of Christ.

The Way of Christ is grounded in love, compassion, justice, and community. The way of violence is grounded in hate, bigotry, self-justification, individualism, and spiritual brokenness. Saul, with God's help, left the way of violence for the Way of Christ. May we too, with God's help, leave violence behind and follow the true Way, the Way of life and love. Amen.