

## From Enemy to Family

### Acts 9:1-20 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. <sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." <sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. <sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. <sup>11</sup> The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. <sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." <sup>13</sup> "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." <sup>17</sup> Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

The term "frenemy" has been around in the English language since the 1950s. It's a word used to describe someone who is friendly to you in spite of fundamental dislike. A frenemy is someone who invites you over to dinner, has a jolly time with you, and then the next day uses all his efforts to oppose you – while still being friendly.

Now, imagine the situation that Ananias finds himself in. There's this man, this Saul of Tarsus. He got his first taste of killing Christians when he stood approving over Stephen's stoning when all Stephen did was speak the truth of who God is and what he had done to save us all. Saul has become even more vocal since then. Murderous threats against Christians came as naturally to him as breathing. This man is evil! And now he is on his way to Damascus, where Ananias and the other followers of the Way, other believers, are. He has come with letters from the high priest permitting the arrest of those followers of the Way and then brought to Jerusalem where they most surely would be killed for their faith in Jesus as their risen Savior.

Ananias has heard the reports about Saul and all the harm he had done to God's holy people in Jerusalem. He knows that Saul is here specifically with authority from the Jewish chief priests to arrests all the believers here in Damascus. Saul is the enemy! But the Lord has come to Ananias in a vision. He has told Ananias to go straight to where Saul is – even giving him directions. The Lord tells Ananias to go and place his hands on Saul to restore his sight.

How might this actually play out? The Lord and his disciples had taught Ananias compassion, to help his neighbors, to love them as he loves himself – actually to love them as Christ loved him. If Ananias goes, will Saul's compatriots arrest him? Is Saul still breathing out those murderous threats? Will he take this opportunity to arrest him? Or worse – will Saul take this opportunity to act as a friend only to find out where more of these followers of the Way, these disciples of Jesus, are so that he can take all of them out in one foul swoop? Are they that cunning to come up with such a devious plot? Will Saul be a frenemy to destroy Christians? Maybe Ananias should just leave him. He's blind? Good. Maybe this is how the Lord eliminates him as a threat to believers, right?

If you were Ananias, what would you do? Would you actually go through going to Saul? Would you go and be alone with someone who literally three days ago was breathing out murderous threats against you and your brothers and sisters in Christ? This is an enemy! How can we welcome him?! How can we do anything to help him?!

"But Saul had a vision! He's changed," you say. People have seen visions before and have not changed. I mean, how many people saw Jesus' miracles but still didn't believe? How many people saw the risen Lord and still doubted? Even his own disciples did that! It's not the fact that Saul saw a vision that changed him. Saul still could have rejected this Jesus who appeared to him. I mean, that's what he's been doing all along. He could have cursed Jesus for his blindness and then used the letters he had from the chief priests to arrest Ananias. He's an enemy. He is devious enough to go the frenemy angle, act as a friend only to get in to destroy the Christians there.

Are there people at church who seem like a frenemy – someone who is friendly to you but you see yourselves as bitter rivals, that they undercut and oppose you all with a smile on their face? Are these the people that you are leery of, that you keep at an arm's

length because they oppose you? Does this attitude play out in your actions among these who you call my brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you withdraw and isolate yourself because you have this suspicious or this intuition that this person will betray you?

We may not or never have breathed out murderous threats against the Church. Jesus certainly wouldn't ask us, "Why do you persecute me?" We are not Saul. But do we hurt the Church? Do we hurt this body of believers with our suspicions, with the idea that we are protecting ourselves? Is there someone here who needs help and support in a traumatic time but that helpful person is not me because I don't want to be hurt by them. So, I smile, say "hi," but I keep my distance. Am I loving people the way Christ loved me, or do I withhold that love and that forgiveness because I have been burned in the past and I'm not about to let someone else play me for a chump and hurt me all over again?

Loving people – frenemies, enemies, whatever – is a risk. Ananias took a risk going to the house of Judas on Straight Street and asking for that man from Tarsus named Saul. He could have been arrested. He could have been deported. He could have been killed, but Ananias took the Lord at his Word that Saul was his chosen instrument to proclaim his name to the Gentiles, their kings, and the people of Israel, and so he went. He trusted God for what would come next as he risked himself in this act of love to his enemy.

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." (verse 17) Everything changed. Saul could see again. He was baptized. He ate again. "At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God." (verse 20) Saul went from being an enemy to being family. Ananias went out on that limb for the Lord, called Saul his brother, and gave him God's gift of holy baptism – a complete changing of Saul to turn him from his spiritual and physical blindness to sight. God brought Saul from the darkness of unbelief to the light of life in him, in his risen Lord, Jesus, the Son of God, his Savior from sin, death, and hell.

How could this have happened that Saul goes from being a total and complete hostile enemy to being family? That's all the power of God. It wasn't the vision that did it; it was the Holy Spirit working through the message. By the Holy Spirit's work, Saul now knew his Savior. He had a new life through his baptism. He knew God's amazing grace that saved a wretch like him. He once was lost, but now was found, was blind but now he sees. He sees his risen Savior. The Lord completely changed his heart and turned it 180 degrees.

We may not have breathed out murderous threats and persecuted the Church, the body of believers in Christ, in the way Saul did. But Saul's story is also our story, our past. When we came into this world, we came as sinners, ones who were hostile to God's law, who would not submit to it nor could we do so. We were by nature objects of wrath. We were God's enemies.

We didn't get a vision of Jesus calling us out as to why we are persecuting him, why we are hostile to him and his followers, but instead he changed us from enemies into family. In holy baptism, God clothed us with Christ's perfection. All our sins from the past, present, and future were washed away. Our hostility with God was washed away. And instead he put his name on us. He called us one of his own. He called us his own children. He made us family. The same Holy Spirit that changed Saul from being an enemy of God into being part of the family of God did the same for us with the same baptism.

We were once enemies of God, but now we are all the family of God. God made that change in us, for us. He did this also for anyone else that you see here, anyone that you may wonder whether or not they're your frenemy. They may be your rival. You may compete with each other. But God has changed them into being a part of this holy family along with you. He washed away their sins just as he washed away yours. He put his name on them just as he has put it on you. He has loved you both the same. He risked his life to that you and your frenemy would be his family, the same family.

Even for those who reject, it's worth the risk for God. And so it's also worth the risk for us, the risk of loving these people that we call brothers and sisters in Christ. Yes, you will probably get hurt doing this. But that's what love risks. That's what you risk for family. It's worth it to continue to point each other to the risen Lord, the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the one who shines his light of salvation into lives filled with the darkness of sin, the one who makes the blind see.

The risen Lord turned Saul from being an enemy to being family. He has done the same for each of us in our own lives – turning us from being God's enemy to being his family. With that same risky love, to whom can we reach out? To whom can we proclaim the risen Christ so that the Lord takes them from being an enemy or a frenemy and instead makes them his family, our family – just as he did for us? Amen.