

If you've been paying any attention at all to the news, you're aware of the college protests going on. They've become a battle ground for Jewish and Palestinian students and their sympathizers. It's not just politics that is polarizing. That's the news that sells. I recently heard of two unique groups that have remained under the radar. The first one has existed for over two years on the campus of the University of Texas in Austin. It was co-founded by a Jewish student and a Palestinian-American student. The group is called Atidna. The word atidna is from the Hebrew word atid meaning "future" and the Arab suffix na which means "our." Together the word atidna means "our future." This group was formed to talk about their future: initially to share similarities between the Jewish and Palestinian cultures: stressing that Jews and Arabs are cousins in one family and "not inherent enemies." They stressed that they weren't created to be enemies. That was until Oct. 7th of last year. Since then the tenor of their events have intensified both to honor the dead on both sides and to comfort those who mourn them. Those showing up have strong opinions but no one is there to start a fight. One student shares, "We have come together and realize that human rights cannot pertain to just certain groups of people. It must pertain to all people." The fact that they are in the same room together is important and amazing. The other group has been in existence in Michigan for over 20 years and is called Zeitouna, which means olive tree in Arabic. This group, made up of six Jewish and six Palestinian women, uses dialogue to build bridges between their cultures- to find common ground in a special sisterhood. They get together and talk candidly but before they talk; they break bread together. One of the

members said that she doesn't even see Jewish or Palestinian anymore, she only sees human beings. One member commented after Oct. 7th, "There's room in a humanitarian way to recognize the trauma of the other. And people have lost that ability right now." There is a lot of dehumanizing rhetoric out there, especially following Oct. 7th. This group stands in protest to what is happening on college campuses. Their motto? Refusing to be enemies! Each session has specific ground rules which allow for each member to share freely. The safety of this group has allowed the dialogues to continue in spite of what is happening in Israel and Gaza. The Zeitounas also inspired another college group to form at the University of Michigan. One member of Zeitouna shared "as a Holocaust survivor, this is what I learned: All human beings are the same. And if we could only realize that, then I think we could build a better world" (CBS [News](#)). There's a word for this- and it is kinship- a kinship that God, in fact, presses us on to and makes possible- even in what sometimes seems impossible.

In today's story in the Book of Acts, we're going backwards to be introduced to Saul. The first time we're introduced to Saul in Acts is in a few chapters before today's story in the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Saul is mentioned as being the coat holder of the witnesses to Stephen's murder by stoning and then we're told a few verses later that Saul was "in full agreement with the murder" (8:1). It is also said of Saul that he "wreaked havoc against the church. Entering one house after another, dragging off both men and women and throwing them into prison" (8:3). And now...we can understand why Luke begins Chapter 9 with "meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out

murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (v. 1). He is so convinced of the errors of others that he cannot see the new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ. I think it's safe to say that Saul had a bad reputation among the early Christians. But Saul saw himself as a good guy who loved God and was trying to protect the covenant. I think it's also safe to say that Saul made it known that he wanted nothing to do with the early followers of Jesus, men or women who belonged to the group called the Way. We have to remember that the distinction as we know it today between Judaism and Christianity isn't operative in the 1st century. Though it is clear that Saul thought those who claimed to follow Jesus but still worshiped in the synagogue were wrong. In today's story, Saul is on the road headed to Damascus, "a city in Syria over a hundred miles to the northeast of Jerusalem" (*Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Acts*, Matt Skinner, p. 68). Damascus is a place over which the Council of Jerusalem had jurisdiction, hence the reason Paul goes to the high priest to get letters to the synagogues in Damascus giving him the authority to take any men or women involved with the Way as prisoners to Jerusalem. Some of you may know the rest of this story, as this is one of the most well-known stories of conversion in the Bible. Luke underscores its' importance by telling it three different times in Acts. All of a sudden, Saul is encircled by a bright and blinding light from heaven, and he falls to the ground, hearing a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?" (9:4)? "Who are you?," Saul asks. Jesus tells Saul who he is and then Jesus commands Saul to "get up and enter the city and that there he would be told what he must do" (v.6). Saul, who had been carrying off Jesus' followers as prisoners, was now being

carried off by those traveling with him, as he was now blind. Therefore, they led him by hand into Damascus where for **three days** he remained blind and didn't eat or drink (vv.8-9). I wonder what happened to Saul in those three days in the dark? Resurrection work, perhaps? It's no mistake that three days is also the timeframe from Jesus' death to the power of his resurrection- to new life. But what about the second call or conversion story often overlooked that immediately follows? The one involving a disciple of Jesus named Ananias?

Yes, Ananias was already a follower of Jesus; however, the Lord also spoke to him in a vision- getting Ananias' attention. The Lord tells him to go to a specific house on a specific street and to ask for Saul. The Lord also tells him that Saul will be praying at the house and that he would be expecting him to restore his sight due to another vision the Lord sent Saul. But Ananias briefed Jesus on Saul- including the horrible things he had done to Ananias' brothers and sisters in Christ, as if Jesus didn't already know. Sometimes we feel like we have to fill God in on other people and what we've heard about them. God already knows and that's what makes this story and our stories so powerful. It is the very presence and power of the risen Lord that makes all things new for both of these men and for each of us. And yet, that's hard for those of us like Ananias who say to God, "You must be kidding!" "This guy is out to get us." Experience teaches us to be cautious about peoples' ability to change. However, as we witness in the Bible over and over again, when God is the agent of change, all things are possible" (*Feasting on the Word*, Joseph S. Harvard, p. 406). God is the main character of this and of each of our call and conversion stories. Thus the story is really not so

much about Saul or Ananias but more about God and the way God works to transform lives- to make things new- resurrection new. Now that's resurrection power.

After Jesus repeats his instructions twice to Ananias and then spells out specifically the plans He has for Saul- plans such as Saul being “the agent the Lord has chosen to carry His name before Gentiles, kings and Israelites” and how much he'll suffer for the sake of Jesus' name (vv. 15-16). Ananias obeys and goes to Judas' house on Straight Street. After finding and greeting Saul, Ananias places his hands on him and says, “Brother Saul, Jesus sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 17). As soon as those words came out of Ananias' mouth, flakes fell from Saul's eyes and his vision was restored. Saul got up and was baptized, and he then ate and regained his strength for the many roads ahead- roads filled with preaching about Jesus and suffering in his name. Saul, is transformed from a man “exercising great power over the church to one overpowered by Jesus” (Skinner, p. 69). And Ananias, is transformed from a man who had no respect or love for Saul into one who trusted the Lord enough to call Saul his brother. One scholar puts it this way, “As we see elsewhere in Acts, miraculous developments carry things only so far; eventually people of faith need to answer a call, say something, and open doors to others. It isn't enough for Saul to encounter Jesus on the road; he also needs a wider community of disciples to confirm his experience and help him move toward wholeness. Ananias, the face of that community, also needs a revelation. Something has to convince him that God is capable of bringing blessings to and through even someone as cruel as Saul”

(*workingpreacher.org, Preaching Acts in Easter (Year C)*, Matt Skinner). It is God and God only who gets to determine a person's worth, potential and call, not us. In LA at Homeboy Industries, recovering gang members-each homie and homegirl- are told this truth: "you are exactly what God had in mind when God made you- and then they begin to inhabit this truth and nothing is the same again. No bullet can pierce this, no prison walls can keep this out. And death can't touch it- it is just that huge" (*Tattoos On the Heart*, Gregory Boyle, pp. 192-193), says Fr. Boyle. Talk about resurrection power? Even though we never hear about Ananias again after today's story, I do wonder if Saul, who later becomes Paul, remains in touch with Ananias. We aren't told; nonetheless, theirs is an unlikely friendship. As back then, we, too, live in a very polarizing time. You say one thing and you offend another. Who do you want to stay away from? Whose reputation frightens or angers you or shuts you down? It's much easier to write them off or to post about them than to sit down and get to know one another and try to find anything about their humanity. Who wants to talk to their worst enemy?

God often puts people in our lives who we might not have chosen as friends (*Lectionary Sermon Series*, p. 207). Before I served at this particular church as a pastor, the previous pastor trusted the work of the Holy Spirit is a powerful way. A man moved to town from Chicago. He was a retired pastor and was into theater. He was retired and had some time on his hands. He wanted to recite entire books of the Bible for the congregation. He wanted someone to study scripture with him. Another man approached the pastor and asked to grow more in his faith

through participating in a men's Bible Study. The retired pastor liked to say he was "five feet 18 inches tall" and was a statue in comparison to the other man who was maybe 5'5. Neither one knew each other. The pastor knew that Jim was outspoken as a progressive while the other loved to define himself as a "Conservative Christian." Nonetheless, the pastor asked the one looking to grow in his faith to help the other as he prepared for a biblical telling. Well, the shorter man thought it was only a one-time thing. But it turned into a weekly meeting on Wednesdays and a special, unlikely friendship. In preparation for the retired pastor's funeral, the other man commented, "God couldn't have paired two different people together- at two opposite ends of the political spectrum. We were Mutt & Jeff." He said, "we argued most weeks, especially about politics, but neither of us ever got angry. We just agreed to disagree. He was a big man- not just because of his stature but because he was a good man. I learned a lot from him; I loved him and will greatly miss him." Friends, that's resurrection power!

Maybe we need to be reminded of the joy that awaits outside the bubbles we live in? Maybe it's time to take a good look at the person in the mirror and be open to change not only in ourselves but about our opinions of others as we follow Christ and listen to the gentle nudges of the Holy Spirit? Thanks be to God! Amen.