

Dear members and friends of St. John,

Our reading for today is from **Acts, chapter 9**:

*<sup>1</sup>But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup>And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup>But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." [ESV]*

**One of the most beloved movies of all times is *The Sound of Music*.** Produced in 1965, this movie seems to engage every generation who views it. Julie Andrews plays the part of Maria, and Christopher Plummer is Captain von Trapp. Even my two sons (who generally hate musicals) never miss a showing when it's broadcast each year on TV.

There's one song in this movie that Maria and the Captain sing together. It's title: Something Good. Part of the lyrics read:

*Perhaps I had a wicked childhood  
Perhaps I had a miserable youth  
But somewhere in my wicked, miserable past  
There must have been a moment of truth*

*For here you are, standing there, loving me  
Whether or not you should  
But somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good*

*Nothing comes from nothing  
Nothing ever could  
So somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good*

A superficial glance at these lyrics may not raise an eyebrow among Lutherans, but it causes me to stomp out of the room every time I hear it sung. The implication is that **God has brought these two people together because they "did something good."** In other words, God is rewarding them for their "goodness". That turns God into a "tip-for-tat" deity: You perform the way God wants you to, and like a trained seal, God will reward you with a fish (or a spouse, new car, better job, etc.). Everyone, slap your flippers together in thanksgiving!

**That is *not* our loving God, who loves us unconditionally.** Take our reading for today from Acts. Saul (better known as St. Paul) is leading a group that is hoping to capture Jesus followers, and return them to Jerusalem for trial and imprisonment. Immediately prior to this reading, Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen. Saul was wicked, evil – a follower of Satan who was doing his bidding.

**How do you think St. Paul would react to the idea that *he must have done something good to deserve God's love*?** Listen to his own description of himself (Romans 7):

*<sup>9</sup>I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. <sup>10</sup>The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. <sup>11</sup>For sin, seizing an*

*opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. <sup>12</sup>So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. <sup>13</sup>Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. <sup>14</sup>For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. <sup>15</sup>For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. <sup>17</sup>So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup>For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [ESV]*

Or, how about St. Paul addressing the Christians in Rome (and therefore you and me - Ephesians 2):

*<sup>1</sup> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup>among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup>But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

St. Paul (at that time, known as Saul) sets out in our reading to destroy Christians. Being led by Satan, he exhibits only hatred and disgust toward God and His followers. And then, unexpectedly, we see the loving arm of God, bringing St. Paul to his knees. **God's love is complete and underserving.** St. Paul is brought into God's kingdom through **the power of the Living Word – Jesus Christ.**

**And so are you.** The ironic thing about our wicked flesh is that we are constantly trying to claim credit for our "goodness." We'd love to think that we did *something good* to warrant the attention of our Lord. "After all, I was a pretty good person. I'm sure God saw in me the qualities that deserved His love and attention." Wrong. He saw only evil. And still, He came to you personally, and rescued you from eternal death!

It should be **a source of endless comfort to you** to know that among the millions who crowd the highways and the byways of this topsy-turvy world, your Lord found you, singled you out, and called you as His own. To every one of His believers, the Savior says, personally and individually: "*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine*" (Isaiah 43:1).

**Jesus found Paul?** Yes, and given the truth about Paul (Saul), our Lord deserves all the glory! **Jesus found you too!** What a blessed thought! **"He is mine, and I am His"** — because His love found you and took you to be His very own. Amen.

Pastor Travis