

“Blinded to See”
Acts 9:1-20

Theologian Megan McKenna tells a story about an encounter she had with some chocolate chip cookies. She says that one day she arrived in the Atlanta airport, tired and grumpy, and was anxious to get home. The airport was under construction and very crowded. But when she saw Mrs. Field's chocolate chip cookies, she smiled! She purchased 12 cookies and got one for free. As she sat down in the waiting area to eat them, there was at her table a woman with three skinny little kids squirming around in the chairs next to her...Megan put down her bag of Mrs. Field's cookies on the table, opened her attaché case to reorganize stuff. Without thinking, she reached into the bag and took out a cookie and bit into it. She was still rooting around in her suitcase and attaché case, and out of the corner of her eye she saw a hand come across the table, reach into her cookie bag, and take one of her cookies! She looked at her and thought: "Hmmm, maybe she's hungry." She figured she could give her one; after all she had thirteen. But just so she knew whose cookies they were, Megan looked at the woman and took another cookie and started chewing. Well, the woman looked back at Megan and took three!—one of them for each of the skinny kids. She thought to herself, "Now they could be hungry," and let it go, but again, to push the point home that these were hers, Megan took another. In rapid succession, she took another. Megan took another. She took three more! Megan couldn't believe it. In a matter of minutes they had managed to snarf down about two pounds of Mrs. Field's cookies. And not only that, the woman had eight of Megan's cookies and she only had four! And then...the woman reached into the bag and took the last cookie and broke it in half and gave it to Megan! At that point, Megan's flight was being called to board. When she got on the plane she was still thinking about the strange incident with the cookies. As Megan reached into her bag to get a pencil and paper to write about the incident, she not only found her pencil and paper, she also found her BAG OF MRS. FIELD'S CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES! She couldn't believe it. She thought to herself, "That woman must think I'm crazy. I ate her cookies!"

Sometimes, it seems that we are not able to see reality as it is. This is not because we intend to do that on purpose. It is not because we are malicious or not intelligent enough. It is just simply hard to see clearly with all of our cultural barriers and our limited and limiting experiences. The worst part of this is that often times, we are not even aware that we see and think what we know is not really the full truth. We often need to stop and examine our way of seeing in order to gain new insights. We need the Holy Spirit to guide us. We also need others to help us see beyond our limits.

This was the experience of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. He was on a mission. He was certain that the followers of Jesus were wrong and that they were a threat to the stability of the country and the Jewish faith. We actually meet Paul in Chapter 7. His name then was Saul and he was part of the group that approved of the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. Saul was carrying orders from the high priest in Jerusalem to the city of Damascus in order to arrest people who were followers of the way of Jesus. He was very certain that what he was doing was right. He was certain that he was defending the purity of the Jewish faith. He was blind to the truth of the way of Christ. He could not imagine for a second that he was wrong. He was a vigilante who was determined to take justice into his own hands. His zeal led him to violence against the followers of Jesus and there was no stopping him. There was no logic to be introduced that could have changed Paul's mind. Yet, something bigger than words and logic entered into the life of Paul and turned things around for him. It was the presence of God. The light of Christ came into his life in such a dramatic vision that he was not able to see for several days and needed the help of his enemies in order to regain his vision. He had to go to an enemy

in order to experience mercy, Ananias. To this day, the church of the house of Ananias is still standing in Damascus, Syria as a witness to the amazing transformation which Paul experienced there. I have been there many times.

But maybe some of us might say, I am not like Paul. I am not that blind. I don't go persecuting those who disagree with me. I don't go to such an extreme. Or some might say, I have faith but I have never experienced the light of Christ in such dramatic ways. I think if we try to compare ourselves literally with the Apostle Paul, we may miss the heart of the story. This is not a story about being super bad or about being a spiritual super hero. It is instead a story about the amazing transformation of life when we encounter the living God. The example of Paul shows us that even the worst of us can be redeemed and changed and that sometimes we need some temporary blindness in order to see with new eyes and to change directions in life. The example of Paul shows us that inside all of us is the core of God's image which can never be taken away from us. Inside all of us is the goodness of God's creation. I believe that this is a very important insight for our times today. We are surrounded by negative news about all the evil of our world and rarely do we hear stories of human goodness and transformation. This is especially true in our political struggles. If you are on one side of an issue, you are always pushed to demonize the other side and make them sound as evil as possible. But the story of our faith tells us something totally different. This is not a call to being naïve. It is a call to see life from the Spirit's perspective.

In their book, *Made for Goodness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 and former Chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and his daughter Mpho, executive director of the Tutu Institute for Prayer and Pilgrimage in Washington, D.C., state that murder and greed are not the norm for human behavior: the norm is goodness. These two Episcopal ministers set out to make a case that goodness changes everything: the ways we see ourselves, the world, and others. They write that, "We are fundamentally good. When you come to think of it, that's who we are at our core. Why else do we get so outraged by wrong? When we hear of any egregious act, we are appalled. Isn't that an incredible assertion about us? Evil and wrong are aberrations. If wrong was the norm, it wouldn't be news. Our newscasts wouldn't lead with the latest acts of murder or mayhem, because they would be ordinary. But murder and mayhem are not the norm. The norm is goodness... You can see from the people we truly admire that we are attracted to goodness. We do not revere people who are successful. We might envy them and wish that their money were transferred to our bank account. But the people we revere are not necessarily successful; they are something else. They are good. Many of us would say we revere Mother Teresa. She wasn't macho. She wasn't even successful. In spite of her many years of lauded and dedicated ministry, people still die in poverty in Calcutta. But even after her death, Mother Teresa is admired, respected, and revered. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are similarly revered not for their success, although they had important successes, but because of the shining example of their goodness."

I would like to offer you a couple of clues that are helpful to us as we open ourselves to God's transforming grace. First, every time you feel the need to judge yourselves or others, I invite you to remember that we are all made for goodness, no one is evil to the core. Each of us are created in the image of God. Second, every time your beliefs lead you to violence against yourself or others whether in thought, word or deed, I invite you to consider taking time to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you to see if there is any new insight you might need to consider. In his book, *The Naked Now*, Richard Rohr says that, "The enormous breakthrough is that when you honor and accept the divine image within yourself, you cannot help but see it in everybody else, too, and you know it is just as undeserved and unmerited as it is in you. That is why you stop judging, and that is how you start loving unconditionally and without asking whether

someone is worthy or not. The breakthrough occurs at once, although the realization deepens and takes on greater conviction over time."

Theologian and Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor told of the time she spent on a seminary admissions committee. They turned this student down, a student who obviously had few academic qualifications for theological study. But he wrote them from his jail cell to tell them that the parole board would let him out if they let him in. So the seminary's admissions committee invited him to plead his case before them. Barbara described how this big guy came in and told them that, as a young teenager, he had held up a convenience store. All he remembered was brandishing this unloaded gun at the clerk, an off duty policeman spotted him, shots rang out. Then, before the oak table of the seminary admissions committee, the young man pulls up his shirt to show them where the policeman's bullet got him in the gut and went out the other side. "That was my Damascus Road, my burning bush!" he exclaimed. Of course, said Barbara, we didn't want to admit him into seminary. But what could we do? We knew Acts 9! If God could make an apostle out of Saul the murderer, what might God do with a guy with a gun? It was just the sort of thing that a God who would raise Jesus from the dead might do."

May we always trust in the goodness of God's creation in us and in others so that every road in our lives is a Damascus road of transformation! Amen.