

This morning I'm gonna tell y'all some stories, but before I do I need to ask a question. By a show of hands have you ever had a misunderstanding? (**pause & raise my hand**) Have you ever been so sure you were right you did not care what anybody else had to say because you knew you were right? (**pause & raise my other hand**) Have you ever been so sure you were right you were going to keep doing what you were doing and you didn't care who it made angry? (**pause & raise both of my hands**) This morning I am going to tell y'all two stories about misunderstanding.

The first story is about my Dad. My Dad is an alumni of North Greenville Jr. College down in South Carolina. While Dad was a student down there Dad heard God tell Dad to help people. Dad didn't quite know what to do with that so when he finished his associates at N. Greenville Jr. College Dad went on up to Carson Newman college in Jefferson City, Tennessee. While Dad was there Dad became convinced God's call to help people meant Dad needed to become a pastor. So he made the journey back home to Orangeburg, South Carolina, and two elders of the First Baptist church agreed Dad had a calling to ministry and they ordained him. Dad pursued this calling. He earned what they called back then a Bachelors of Theology from Southern Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and began serving small rural churches in East Tennessee. (**pause**) Over the next seven or eight years Dad served I think three churches; and every one ran him out. This was back in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Those churches did not want to do youth ministry. They did not want to have anything to do with African Americans. If Dad was here today he could tell you all about what they did not want. (**pause**) In the end Dad was chewed up and spat out. Dad was angry too. He felt hurt and betrayed. My Dad just did not understand why all of this was had happened. Dad was angry at God, and Dad was angry at God's people. It took years to figure it out. Finally; finally, Dad began to understand. Dad and God had had a misunderstanding.

Speaking of misunderstanding let's talk about this Saul/Paul guy. By a show of hands how many of y'all had a nickname growing up? (**pause for a show of hands**) When I left Alabama I left the nickname Richie behind. My family and those who knew me still call me Rich or Richie, but no one here in North Carolina. Many people misunderstand and think Saul's name changed to Paul when Paul was converted, but this is not true. Paul was a Roman citizen, of Greek origin born to a Jewish family of Pharisees. Among the Jews he was known as Saul -- very likely named for king Saul of the tribe of Benjamin, the first king of Israel. However, among the Greeks and Romans he was known as Paul. The two names made it easier for Saul to move between the two cultures much the same way a nickname from childhood makes it easier for folks to go back home again.

Saul was a Pharisee. Saul's Daddy was a Pharisee. Saul was trained under one of the most strict, traditional and respected Pharisees of his day; a member of the Sanhedrin named Gamaliel. Saul was very zealous for the Law of Moses and the traditions of the elders. Even more zealous than most of his fellow Pharisees. Saul had been well taught and he was sure he knew what was right and what was wrong. Saul meant to make sure his Jewish religion would not be watered down or tainted. He saw these followers of, "The Way," as being a real threat to Judaism (Acts 9:2). Saul began breathing threats against the followers of the Way of Jesus Christ. Saul held the cloaks of the men who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58). Saul went to the Sanhedrin to get letters to the synagogues of Damascus so he might pursue these follower of the Way of Jesus Christ. When Saul encountered them he intended to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and possibly stoning. Saul was driven, passionate and above all Saul thought he had it all worked out. (**pause**) Isn't that how misunderstandings usually happen?

Saul and his traveling companions were almost to Damascus when a bright light shone on Saul from heaven. The light was so bright it knocked Saul to the ground. A voice from heaven spoke to him saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me" (Acts 9:4). Saul did not understand. Saul was certain he was doing what God wanted Saul to do. Saul was positive he was doing what God wanted Saul to do; but now there was this light and this voice. Saul

had sense enough to remember his manners when Saul asks, **“Who are you, Lord”** (Acts 9:5)? The voice replied, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do”** (Acts 9:5-6).

Saul was a gifted and well taught Pharisee. We know from Saul’s letters in the New Testament it would not have been lost on Saul that he was blind for three days. The Israelites had three days to prepare before God appeared on Sinai with the Ten Commandments. I wonder if it was lost on Saul that when Saul asks who is speaking to Saul the response is, **“I am Jesus,”** which is very similar to the way God identifies God’s self, **“I am,”** in the book of Exodus. Saul struggled to understand what had happened to him. Saul fasted, and did not eat or drink for three days.

My sisters and brothers how are we to know when we are right about what we are doing and when we are getting in God’s way? How are we to know when we are having a misunderstanding with God? **(pause)** Do you remember those old Verizon commercials with the guy wandering around asking, **“Can you hear me now?”** **(Raise my hand for a show of hands.)** I wonder if God isn’t asking the same thing. **(pause)** Can you hear me now? **(pause)** My brothers and sisters, are we listening? Are we paying attention? Do we want to hear what God has to say; or would we be happier if we just had our own opinions reaffirmed? **(pause)** Yeah. God doesn’t work that way. God is not hear for our good pleasure, we were created for God’s. Amen? **Amen!** So how do we know what God is saying and how do we know when we are wrong?

For my Dad it was fruitfulness. My Dad was absolutely called to help people, but Dad was called to help people by working in the criminal justice system. Dad worked with the criminal justice system in Knoxville, Tennessee. Dad then started two different nonprofits to work with inmates seeking rehabilitation. My folks ran a halfway house in Nashville. That’s where I learned to walk. Finally Dad, worked as an intake officer in the Juvenile Detention Center in Huntsville, Alabama for 20 years. I can’t tell you how many of Dad’s “clients” made it into our Boy Scout troop. Dad was fruitful through social work in the criminal justice system in ways he was never fruitful, or fulfilled as a pastor. Once Dad figured out where the misunderstanding was Dad’s fruitfulness and quality of life became much better.

Could it be the best way to know if we are doing things our way or God’s way is to look to see where we are being fruitful and where we are falling short? Could it be we need to do a better job of listening for God and to God so when God speaks we get a better understanding of where God would have us to go and what God would have us to do? In a moment we are going to have two opportunities to respond to God’s guidance. The first opportunity will be through our tithes and offerings. Those funds are about providing the means to be more fruitful inside these walls and out in the community. That requires a commitment from all of us. The second opportunity is to come to God’s table and celebrate Holy Communion. Here at God’s table we have the opportunity to leave behind all of the worry, the stress, the guilt and the shame we carry to be able to come and break bread with God. This is an opportunity to hear God clearly, and to take strength in God’s grace for the task at hand. The only questions left to ask are will we listen, and how will we respond?

In the name of Jesus Christ,

Amen