



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



The Best and the Worst of Times

Text: Acts 9:20-31

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In his great novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens begins with the words, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

He is, of course, speaking of life in London and Paris. Life in London was going well, and Paris was in the teeth of the French Revolution. It was the best of times and the worst of times depending on which side of the pond you happened to be.

When you read this section of Acts 9 you begin to have a sense of some things.

Saul, St. Paul, is now a Christian and preaching. He is gung ho for Jesus.

The thing is, people aren't gung ho about him being gung ho. The Jewish community wants to kill him. He is, to them, a traitor. He went from one side to the other side.

The Christian community doesn't trust him. Why? Because he had been persecuting them and now he was preaching to them. It is difficult to believe that the person who was your enemy on Tuesday is your friend on Thursday.

So life for Paul isn't going well at the moment. He is hated by those he left and those he has joined have not welcomed him with open arms.

And yet Luke says at the end:

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

It was, in so many ways, the best and worst of times.

We deal with the enigma of good times and bad times all the time. Sometimes it's difficult to tell good from bad.

The story is told of a king in Africa who had a close friend with whom he grew up. The friend had a habit of looking at every situation that ever occurred in his life (positive or negative) and remarking, "This is good!"

One day the king and his friend were out on a hunting expedition. The friend would load and prepare the guns for the king. The friend had apparently done something wrong in preparing one of the guns, for after taking the gun from his friend, the king fired it and his thumb was blown off. Examining the situation the friend remarked as usual, "This is good!"

To which the king replied, "No, this is NOT good!" and proceeded to send his friend to jail.

About a year later, the king was hunting in an area that he should have known to stay clear of. Cannibals captured him and took them to their village. They tied his hands, stacked some wood, set up a stake and bound him to the stake.

As they came near to set fire to the wood, they noticed that the king was missing a thumb. Being superstitious, they never ate anyone that was less than whole. So untying the king, they sent him on his way.

As he returned home, he was reminded of the event that had taken his thumb and felt remorse for his treatment of his friend. He went immediately to the jail to speak with his friend.

"You were right," he said, "it was good that my thumb was blown off." And he proceeded to tell the friend all that had just happened. "And so I am very sorry for sending you to jail for so long. It was bad for me to do this."

"No," his friend replied, "This is good!"

"What do you mean, 'This is good'? How could it be good that I sent my friend to jail for a year?"

"If I had NOT been in jail, I would have been with you!"

I like this story. It is sort of a dumb story, but I also find that it is true of life. The hardships we endure are often the things that reaped us the greatest rewards, and the good times turned out to be not so good. It's not always easy to tell the good times from the bad times.

Secondly, good times and difficult times live in constant partnership with one another because people often live in a constant state of tension with each other.

At St. Marks we are blessed with great diversity. Or, we are cursed with great diversity. Depending on which day of the week you ask me, depending on which way the wind is blowing, may change my answer as to us being blessed or cursed by diversity.

We are blessed or cursed with this diversity because it truly is a part of our congregational

DNA.

This church was founded in 1837 by German immigrants who came to the United States, floated on the Ohio River, and settled here. The people who founded this church had something of a Lutheran background, but they were a little too ornery and a little too independent to call themselves Lutheran. So they called themselves using the name that Martin Luther first used for his movement of the church, Evangelicals. The word, obviously, has changed a bit over the years, but that's what the group of people who founded this church were.

They were people who fled their homeland for freedom and prosperity this new part of the world would offer them. They wanted freedom to live, to breathe, and to Worship as they saw fit. They also had amazingly generous spirits that looked to build hospitals and places for healing. So this group of, very independent Germans founded the church.

They were not of one mind on a lot of things. They were the people who didn't fit into the theological categories that were traditionally part of the German heritage of either being Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed. But they bonded together and their generous spirit enabled them to build a church. That same generosity of spirit enabled them years later to join with the German Reformed Church and later with the Congregational Christian Churches to form the United Church of Christ.

The DNA of those people is in the walls of this place. We come from a wide mix of backgrounds and, frankly, sometimes it is straining.

Often, when we serve Holy Communion and everyone is sitting in the pews and the elements are being served to everyone I like to watch and see the faces of people in the congregation. I know enough people and enough about a lot of people to know what they believe in.

Some people have a belief that Holy Communion is a memorial where we are simply reminded of Jesus' goodness to us and Jesus' sacrifice to us.

Some believe that they are taking the actual body and blood of Christ.

Some would say that the bread and cup are symbols of the body and blood of Christ.

Some see it as a great symbol for people coming together as one in a brief, shining moment.

I suspect there are some who see it as a snack.

And there are some who don't have a clue and have never given this a great deal of thought.

And it's all okay. The diversity of opinion is neither good nor bad, it just is what it is, a diversity of opinion by good people. Sometimes, in our modern day culture, we are finding more and more that people do not or cannot appreciate diversity. It saddens me greatly because I firmly believe that the only way people really grow is when we all have an opportunity to bounce a lot of ideas off

of each other.

But often there are people who come here and breathe the air that is in this place and feel the DNA of those very independent Germans and feel at home.

And it all reminds me of the tension in the early Christian church.

Did Paul like being hated by those he left? No.

Did Paul like not being trusted by the people in the early Christian community? No.

Did Paul like the fact that people wanted to kill him? No.

People strained with each other. But they also rejoiced together. They found a common bond in Jesus Christ and hung in there whether there was peace or persecution.

We often, in life crave the best of times. We celebrate those moments.

But best and worst often dance hand in hand.

People with new babies are delighted in the new life in their midst and filled with joy; and bone weary from 2AM feedings and diaper changing.

People who are newly married delight in the joy of being with a person they love; and they learn that living this closely to another human being reveals a side of them that they didn't know.

Kids go away to college and are excited about new opportunities and new friends; and often find themselves struggling, at times, with profound loneliness and struggling with difficult courses.

Life is difficult. We wrestle with the best and the worst all the time and are ultimately better for it.