

Today is World Communion Sunday, celebrating our oneness in Christ with all our siblings around the world. It is the day to celebrate the unity of the church within and beyond our cultural and denominational differences across the world. As I think about this unity, however, honestly, I cannot help but think about the present powerful divisions within our society and the divisions that have so often afflicted the very church whose unity we celebrate.

For example, some of the divides in both church and society focus on doctrine disagreeing over certain understandings of the truth; organization and power disagreeing on who holds power and how it is to be wielded; atmosphere disagreeing on levels of formality or informality, high church or low church; and essential tasks—evangelism or social action, personal piety or social holiness. In Christianity, especially in The United Methodist Church, we take both/and, not either/or. Both personal piety and social holiness are essential. Both evangelism and social action are necessary.

In speaking of both/and, we have a complicated Scripture that comes to us from a complicated community about this complicated person whose name is "Saul the Persecutor," who becomes "Paul the Apostle." We often generalize that "Saul the Persecutor" is a bad person, while "Paul the Apostle" is a good person. So, we only talk about "Paul the Apostle" and make him a "superhero" in church. But we need to know that there is no "Paul the Apostle" without "Saul the Persecutor." So, we will talk about "Saul the Persecutor" and his mission today before talking about "Paul the Apostle" and his mission.

Today, we have Saul from a place called Tarsus, an affluent and diverse community that valued education. Saul was born a Roman citizen. At some point, Saul moved to Jerusalem and studied religion under Gamaliel, a Pharisee and an esteemed rabbi (Acts 22:3). Saul was a young man who was well educated and, on his way, to becoming a rabbi. Saul was a zealous man of the Jewish faith. He had a deep faith and lived his life according to Judaism with great fervor and devotion. His deep belief in Yahweh led him to believe that Jesus was an imposter and a liar. His mission was to protect Judaism by persecuting Jesus' followers as he viewed Christians as deceitful and a threat to Judaism. Protecting Judaism was his mission, even if that meant putting Christians to death.

From today's scripture, we see how Saul was involved in the martyrdom of St. Stephen, which tells us that having a mission with a wrong understanding is very dangerous. And from that point on, he got contracts from the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of Jews, to extinguish the movement of Jesus' followers. A mission with a wrong understanding harms others, even to death.

Now, here are some reflective questions. Are we causing harm to others because of what we believe? Because of me, and because of you, is anyone suffering? Are we intentionally harming or strategically planning to harm others because of our "felt-rightness?" If my answer, your answer, our answer is yes to any one of these questions, then it is time for us to stop doing what we are doing. "Do No Harm" is the first simple rule we are to follow in The United Methodist Church. Let's do no harm. Amen.