

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
May 1, 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Acts 9:1-18

Sermon: Blindspots

This month of May is Asian Heritage Month. The United Church of Canada celebrates a strong Asian community within our church family, with congregations, members and leaders whose faith is both energizing and inspiring. On the United Church's website there are a number of excellent resources, videos and stories that we hope to share with you, in worship and over social media throughout this month.

Today, I want to share with you a story that was shared by one of my colleagues in ministry, Rev. MiYeon Kim.

I grew up in South Korea hearing about how my grandparents and their generation experienced terrible suffering during the time of Japanese military occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. I heard that the Korean language was forbidden to use in school and the workplace, and that Koreans were encouraged to adopt Japanese names. The most brutal story above all, however, was the story of the Comfort Women: teenage girls who were kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese military at that time. They were sent to various parts of Asia and raped up to 40 times a day by the Japanese soldiers.

When the war ended and these women returned to Korea, they hid the atrocities they had suffered so as not to shame their families. They held this secret until South Korea's U.S.-backed dictatorship was overthrown in 1988. Throughout the 1990s more and more of the Comfort Women came forward, most of them now grandmothers. They shared the unspeakable horrors that were committed against them in the Occupation Era.

The women came forward to demand an apology from the Japanese government, which instead claimed that these women were merely prostitutes. Now most of the Comfort Women are over 90 years-old; as of this writing there are only 22 of them left. The governments of South Korea and Japan attempted to sweep this issue under the rug so as not to damage Korean-Japanese relations, and a sincere conversation about a restitution of justice for these women has never occurred. There continues to be a deep-rooted hostility among the Korean and Japanese people because of the many unresolved issues from the occupation, yet the issue of the Comfort Women inflames the greatest passion.

Due to this historical background, I recognize that I also have prejudice and hostility toward the Japanese people in my innermost heart.

I was ordained within the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (KiJang PROK) and sought admission to the Order of Ministry of The United Church of Canada. In Korea I had very little exposure to Japanese people, so my prejudices were not challenged. However, my life and

ministry in Canada have allowed me to meet and work with Japanese people in the United Church: Dr. Kathy Yamashita and the Rev. Kyoko Miura.

When Kathy visited our presbytery in her capacity as Conference President, she shared with us her own family's story during the meeting. I learned that Japanese-Canadians suffered persecution during World War II; they were placed in internment camps and had their property taken from them. It was a story I had never heard before.

I became acquainted with the Rev. Kyoko in a class I took for my continuing education. In the class, she and I were the only Asians among 15 other students. Whether she knew my buried prejudice toward Japanese people or not, she visited with me every breaktime and lunchtime. Ironically, she was the only one who showed me that much kindness.

I slowly opened my heart from politeness to friendship. Through this experience, I considered how Asians in Canada need to cooperate with one another rather than hold on to the grudges of the past.

So it became a new challenge for me to overcome my own prejudice, and where it actually came from. To open my mind and make harmony with Japanese people today, despite the wrong actions of people in the past or our governments today, and to live out Christ's commandment to become reconciled with our neighbours. It is not easy. I ... (still) fight hard against the stereotypes that I grew up with.

MiYeon's reflection about confronting her own prejudice came to mind for me when I was looking at the scripture reading for today – and the relationship between Saul or Paul and Ananias.

According to the book of Acts Saul was already known to be Jesus' number one enemy. When the apostle Stephen was murdered by those who opposed the early followers of Jesus, Saul was on the sidelines, cheering them on. Acts describes him as breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He even went to the high priest in Jerusalem and asked for letters of introduction to the synagogue at Damascus, so that, if any followers of Jesus could be found in the community at Damascus, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. And we know there were believers at Damascus, because that is where Ananias was found.

Saul held the kind of prejudice that was so deeply rooted that he wouldn't even have recognized it as prejudice. For him, it was just common sense – the followers of Jesus' Way were wrong, and their faith story was infectious like a contagious disease. A disease that needed to be stamped out. And fast. Even a community far from the centre, like Damascus, needed to be de-contaminated. Saul was the man for the job. And so he set out for Damascus. But once again, it seems like God had other plans. Because God has chosen the least likeliest person of all to speak God's Good News, to encounter the Risen Christ, to win hearts for Jesus instead of stamping out the spread of his followers.

Saul's call or conversion to Paul plays out a common theme in the book of Acts. It is the story of someone being brought to belief by **not** seeing. Being struck blind on the road to Damascus reveals only the final, most literal blindness of Saul's life. He believed himself to be faithful and zealous in his love for God. He just couldn't understand the connection between God and Jesus that the early believers celebrated.

Saul's whole identity was defined by what he rejected and who he hated. His physical sight might have been 20/20, but his vision of God in the world was extremely narrow. But he would probably never describe himself as prejudiced – he was just doing God's work!

And then Saul was struck down by God's light. Driven to the ground, he heard a voice and the light finally penetrated his spiritual blindness. Saul recognized the voice and called him, the risen Christ, "Lord". God was revealed in an unexpected place for Saul too. His own prejudice was revealed to him and he couldn't see the way forward.

Meanwhile in Damascus there was a believer named Ananias – he encountered God in a vision. God told him to go to the house where Saul was being cared for, to lay hands on him in prayer, that Saul might regain his sight. God didn't say "baptize him, teach him to be a Christian, convert him to the fold." No, God simply told Ananias that Saul would become God's instrument in the world – so God needed him to see.

At first Ananias said "no." Not me, no way, not now not ever. Do you know what you are asking of me God?

Because Ananias already knew Saul by name. Breathing threats and murder, binding men and women to face the charge of blasphemy – that news made it to Damascus long before Saul did.

God, however, counsels Ananias that special plans have been prepared for Saul. Now Saul is actually going to become what he thought he already was—God's instrument. But first Ananias had to heal Saul so that Saul could, in turn, serve those whom he persecuted. If we, and Ananias, believe that all things are possible with God – we know that God could have just healed Saul directly, just given him vision, both physically and spiritually speaking.

But God has doubled the healing power of this story. Saul, who came to be known as Paul, was healed of his blindness – speaking both of his physical sight and his vision of Jesus as the Risen Christ. Meanwhile Ananias was healed of his prejudice against Paul. It took courage for Ananias to confront his own prejudice, just as it had for Paul and for my colleague MiYeon.

We all have prejudices that we have absorbed from our experiences in the world around us, ranging from our family histories to our first impressions. The story of Paul and

Ananias reminds us that God calls us to confront these unexamined beliefs from time to time – to take a look at our own blindnesses and to ask for healing.

Oftentimes we are too quick to say “but I am not prejudiced.” We say this before we have really taken stock of our own attitudes. Instead of being reactive, the United Church has called all its communities of faith to be pro-active.

Each community of faith has been invited to consider some “Equity Aspirations” in their mission and ministry: to question our biases, to challenge our assumptions, to notice who is missing, to value all voices, to aim for equity and to live out our commitments.

Sometimes it is just too easy to say “But I’m not prejudiced” or “We treat everyone the same.” But if we never ask others if they feel they have been treated fairly, we will just keep repeating the same mistakes.

The followers of Jesus, like Ananias, had to risk asking those hard questions in order to find the way forward. And newly converted followers, like Paul, had to take another look at their assumption that they were doing the right thing, when what they were doing was hurting someone just because they were different. The path forward for all people of faith was this:

Hatred is answered by love. The enemy becomes the beloved. No wonder God had to take the first step! May we have the courage to listen.