

## "Somethin's Gotta Give"

Acts 9:1-9; Acts 9:10-20

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 7, 2017 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

If you're a jazz fan like me, you'll likely remember an old song Ella Fitzgerald made famous. It goes like this:

When an irresistible force such as you  
Meets an old immovable object like me  
You can bet as sure as you live  
Somethin's gotta give, somethin's gotta give,  
Somethin's gotta give.

The lyrics of the song imply that these two people will inevitably get together, that it can't be stopped from happening, and that there will be noticeable results. Certainly some romances seem to work that way: two "forces" that are just destined to run into each other. When the sparks of love begin to fly, then "somethin's gotta give," and things will never be the same again. Boom!

It's interesting that much of modern technology is built on getting things to collide—whether they're small like ions or objects on a much greater scale. A long list of inventions have been developed by applying this principle to solids, gasses, and liquids. When things collide, things happen; and when this process can be controlled, positive results are often attained.

Consider the particles in a single atom. Though incredibly small they are held together with tremendous force. Years ago scientists began to realize that if an atom could be smashed—that is, the parts in it made to fly apart—energy that had been holding it together might be released for a useful purpose. So physicists and engineers bombarded the atom with neutrons. This resulting collision effectively splits the atom, releasing that latent energy. Split atoms then collide with more atoms, which release additional energy through a series of chain reactions.

The promise of the atom to generate electricity is a reality, but then so is the darker side that comes along with it. We remember Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and power plant in Japan. Things can get out of hand. The same theory that gave us atomic energy has also led to the atomic bomb. Without doubt, however, power is definitely released when two objects forcefully intersect.

Our scripture from Acts for this morning also reports a collision of sorts. In it two people run smack into each other. And for one of them, it was the surprise of a lifetime.

After the death of Jesus his work and message was carried on by Peter and the others. While their words were often well received and new converts added, their witness also stirred up opposition. We hear of Stephen, chosen to help with food distribution to widows, who almost immediately enraged some of the synagogue members.

They got some men to complain that he had been teaching blasphemy and, therefore, was a threat to the community. On this charge they brought him before the religious council. There,

instead of being contrite, he accused the leaders of failure to keep the Law of Moses. They were further angered and he was dragged out to the edge of the city to be silenced by stoning. Among those who witnessed this sentence was a young man by the name of Saul. Although there is no mention that he took direct part in the stoning, he is said to have supported it.

Soon after this Saul became a man with a mission. His drive was to quiet the Christians and put down the apostasy he thought was being proclaimed. He and others attempted to weed out this growing movement before it could catch hold. The story of Stephen concludes: "Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentations over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison."

Nothing more is said about Saul's actions than this, but we clearly get the idea. He brings all the zeal of impassioned youth to bear on it, and this purge had at least tacit approval from the religious authority. Once he identified and imprisoned many nearby followers of Christ, Saul was ready to turn his attention elsewhere.

He goes to the high priest and asks for letters to Damascus. These would authorize extradition of any followers of Christ so that they might be brought to Jerusalem for trial and sentencing. He apparently receives the documents he requested, although it isn't certain how much legal weight they carried. Certainly, though, he feels they give him the moral authority to continue his campaign against the early Church. So he sets off to Syria with renewed vigor.

Here's a man full of confidence. He has tasted victory and he's off to win even more encounters. Saul is probably brash and arrogant, filled with self-righteousness for maintaining the purity of his religion. So there he is, on top of the world, yet totally unaware of what is about to happen. He is going to collide with something that is literally going to knock him flat on the ground.

Everything in his life has been taking Saul full speed in one direction; now a force even more powerful is about to stop him dead in his tracks, turn him 180 degrees, and then and propel him double speed in the opposite direction. As vigorous as he once was to destroy the Jesus Movement, soon he will bring all his strength to the task of building it up.

This about-face catches everyone by surprise, but no one more than Saul himself. It's as if Rush Limbaugh would go on the air one day and get behind Elizabeth Warren's candidacy for President or Bernie Sanders' tweeting "Donald Trump is a nice guy and I now support him wholeheartedly." Saul's reversal is that improbable, and even more so.

Saul's sudden vision comes while travelling on the dusty road to Damascus and is described as a great burst of light. His eyes can't handle its intensity and he's blinded by its brightness. He falls to the ground and lies there until words break the silence. "Saul," they say, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" All he can manage to get out of his mouth is "Who are you?"

"I am Jesus who you are persecuting. Get up, Saul, Enter the city, and you will be told what to do."

The story now moves to Damascus, but no one there has a credible explanation for what has occurred. When Paul's sight is later restored through Ananias, he suddenly experiences a total change of heart. He renounces his past and seeks baptism in Christ's name. Now the former inquisitor begins to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah of God, to the astonishment of all who knew him. He adopts the name Paul and then spends the rest of his life taking the Good News to both Jew and Gentile. All because of a collision that released tremendous power.

In his case when hatred collided with love, only one force could win. When intolerance ran into acceptance, only one attitude could survive. When persecution came face to face with the Gospel, only one power would prevail. The collision out there on the Damascus Road changed one man's life forever and it likewise began to change other lives around him.

I believe there are times when we, too, are directly confronted by Jesus—perhaps not as dramatically as Paul's encounter, but just as surely. Through pang of conscience, at a moment of clear alertness, in times of crisis and testing, even just going about our daily lives, Christ may come and challenge us as to what we are doing with our lives.

Perhaps this kind of encounter brought you into the church in the first place, or back to it if you've been away. These times of new awareness often result in major life shifts of one type or another.

Maybe such a past encounter has forced you to look at how your work life and your faith square up. Maybe it's compelled you to reconsider your most important relationships through a new lens of love and caring. Maybe it's caused you to change careers or where you live. Maybe it's confronted you with the need to overcome an addiction or another destructive behavior. Maybe your encounter hasn't happened yet, but who can tell what **tomorrow** will bring?

Whenever there's a collision of forces, we may get thrown off balance for a while. In the process, however, we're likely to gain a new sense of clarity and resolve and strength for moving ahead in the very ways we need to go.

When the irresistible force of Jesus' spirit meets the immovable object of ourselves, somethin's gotta give. It may stun us for a time, it may confuse and even frighten us, but it does get our attention. When we realize it wasn't a truck we ran into but Christ himself, then we can't help but notice. When we understand that such an encounter isn't there to destroy us but to build us up, then we are given promise of a new beginning.

Every collision releases tremendous power. Particularly in matters of faith, such unanticipated times give us a chance to break through the old to a new level. They bring us an opportunity to grow forward into our potential—*provided* we can grasp the possibilities they bring, *provided* we can seize the moment to act, *provided* we can make the adjustments they require. In reliance on ourselves that may seem impossible; yet, trusting in the strength of Jesus, we find we not only have a reason for change but also the means for change.

When Jesus pits his will against ours, then "somethin's gotta give." When we respond, then we move forward for good.