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Acts 9:1-20: Convers(at)ions

There is an individual in the Yale Facebook group that, at first glance, I did not believe was a real person. I'll call him Eli, and he stood out to me because in one of the earliest posts he shared his music taste and it was very similar to mine. However, I soon realized that Eli and I were not similar: he began sharing Ted Cruz links to the group, which shocked me considering that Eli's music taste comprised of some of the most liberal rappers around. I was so surprised that I actually thought that his support might be a joke, but after Facebook stalking it became clear that Eli, this potential friend of mine was an unabashed Republican.

To fully explain the significance of this realization, out of all of my friends and acquaintances, I can count the number of Republicans I actually know on one hand. And I understand that my perspective is particularly isolated and may not be that relatable to all of you, but I think that everybody isolates themselves, particularly when it comes to politics. We unfriend racists on Facebook, we listen to NPR and tune out Fox News, and surround ourselves with those of like-minded political views. Even at Brown, we like to talk a lot about diversity in terms of sexuality or race, but

we rarely strive to get a diversity of political opinions. Thus, when I discovered that Eli was a Ted Cruz supporter, I did not know how to react—here was this figure that could interrupt my carefully constructed bubble of liberalness, and I was afraid.

Although this passage seems to focus on Saul's conversion to Paul, I find Ananias's struggle very interesting. If I were Ananias in the reading from today, I would be freaked out. He's this underground radical Christian that is persecuted on all sides, and Saul has come to his city with the explicit purpose of bringing Ananias and his fellow Christians bound to Jerusalem. Ananias should be laying low, trying to make sure that neither he nor his friends get arrested, but God tells him to do the opposite. God tells Ananias to not only go out into the dangerous streets, but to go to the House of Judas. It's as if God has forgotten the history between Judas, Christians, and the Roman police. I know that Ananias should trust in God, in God's ability to have a plan, but this particular request seems ill-advised; God is asking Ananias to put his life on the line for no clear reason. I was shocked when Ananias only objected once to God's request, he had no assurance of safety, God simply says that Saul will be the messenger of the Lord, as if that is an assurance that this man will not immediately imprison Ananias upon his arrival to the House of Judas.

If I was Ananias, I wouldn't just be scared for my life, but I would be pretty jealous of Saul. Why is Saul the messenger of God? What has he done that has earned him the privilege to bring God's name to Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel? Ananias and the other Apostles have been working hard in the wake of Jesus's death to establish a church, and God just kind of shrugs it off and decides to pick somebody else to deliver God's message. Saul seems like he is the last person God should pick, as he has literally gone against God's will at every turn, but God still picks him. I would like to think that if I received this message from God I would go to Saul, but given the circumstances, I don't think that I could.

However, Ananias appears to have more patience and courage than me, and he goes to Saul. Now although this story is generally labeled as a conversion, for me it seemed more like a conversation. Saul and Ananias both came to the table with something to offer. Saul has seen God for himself and has spent days reflecting on his life, and Ananias has the experience starting the church and his relationships with the apostles. Not only is it a conversation, but it is an intimate conversation. Saul and Ananias come from these disparate groups and oppositional political opinions, but God makes them get in the same room and has Ananias lay his hands on Saul. Ananias can't comment on one of Saul's Facebook posts, he

can't send him a strongly worded email, he has to be close and intimate with this figure that seems like his natural enemy.

And the conversation works. Saul becomes Paul, he sits in the temple for three days, studying the scriptures, trying to become a Christian. Paul will go on to start the Christian faith, and Ananias doesn't really seem to go anywhere. I like to imagine Ananias receiving one of Paul's letters in the mail and still harboring some minor resentment that this man that Ananias reached out to has now become this major figure in the church. But at the same time, I am sure that Ananias knew that God had a plan.

Ananias put his faith in God's ability to change people against all odds, and everything turned out okay. And this is where I become conflicted with this reading. Because I know that everything will not always be okay. I recently saw a video of individuals going to Trump rallies carrying signs that said "free hugs" and being met with mace and attacks. And obviously this video over-emphasized the cruelty of the Trump supporters, but sometimes it can be dangerous to go outside of your comfort zone. Sometimes getting intimate with other people can result in actual physical violence. Ananias was spared, but who knows how many other well-meaning people approached Saul before God intervened and were arrested? As easy as it is to say that God has a plan, it seems that sometimes getting

out of one's comfort zone isn't in God's plan, and an individual is not truly safe. I don't necessarily feel comfortable telling people to go out and lay their hands on their enemies, because sometimes your enemy will lay hands on you, and somebody gets hurt. Thus, I think that we should use Ananias as an ideal to aspire to, but not a step by step guide to meeting Trump supporters. Being intimate, honest, and trusting in your enemies is amazing, but not always feasible, but I also believe in the inherent goodness of people, and I think that, for the most part, trying to live like Ananias will yield more good interactions than harmful ones.

Sometimes I wish that in my conversations with those of opposing political opinions I had to have the intimacy that Ananias does with Saul. Although I did not say anything to Eli directly, I was tempted to point out the dissonance between his music taste and political views in some snarky post, but I held back.

That being said, I have not always held back. In the wake of the Baltimore Uprising, one girl that I knew from Poly made a long post that I strongly disagreed with, and I made my opinions known in paragraph long comments about how anti-blackness and white supremacy have shaped Baltimore. In the heat of the moment, it felt good, I felt right. I had my gang of liberal Facebook friends supporting and edging me on. But, looking

back on it, nothing has changed. That girl still has her beliefs that I still don't agree with; although we were arguing with one another, neither of us approached it like a conversation. I had approached this particular exchange like a conversion, I thought that my view was correct and that she needed to change the error of her ways. Neither of us thought that the other brought anything to the table, we simply wanted to lay out our pre-arranged beliefs against each other's and walked away. In fact, the only thing that really came out of that debate was the creation of an awkward silence whenever I see this particular individual around Baltimore. And I am not proud of my actions, in fact I sometimes wish that I could go back and never interact with her in the first place, or maybe hold off until I saw her in person and try to engage her with intimacy, not hiding behind a computer screen. And so, I decided to hold back when it came to Eli. I decided that snarky comments or shady posts would get me nowhere, and if anything it would stop the conversation before it even began. I decided that I would wait to meet Eli, to understand his background and then make a decision about how to approach him. And, although I may not be ready to start watching Fox News or attend a Young Republicans meeting, I do hope that through my life I can strive to be more open minded, to get outside of my comfort zone, to understand that everybody has something to bring to the table, and that

every meeting of disparate opinions is an opportunity for a conversation, not a conversion.