I am not sure if any of you have ever watched a show on PBS called Rick Steve’s Europe. It’s not a bad show. It is usually nice to look at and highlights some worthwhile sites to see while traveling in Europe. That being said there is one thing that I have noticed and that is Rick Steves (the host of the show) seems to be unable to believe that there are or have ever been any problems in Europe. It’s like he got the chamber of commerce tour and went with it. The other day I was watching and he was somewhere in Germany and he said something to the effect of “After a few missteps in the first part of the twentieth century Germany has roared back as the vibrant, fun loving economic engine of Europe.” I mean I guess if you count goosestepping as a mis-stepping he is technically correct. But if you didn’t know better you might come away thinking that the whole Third Reich business was akin to an awkward eight grade photo or white slacks after Labor Day. And I understand that his show exists mainly to get you to buy his guidebooks, so he wants to make the product as attractive as possible, but it can be a little disorienting. Sort of like when Turkish officials describe the Armenian Genocide as one big misunderstanding.

There is a human tendency to see only the good in people we like and only the bad in people we dislike. What this leads to is an incomplete understanding of others. We have rose-tinted understandings of our friends and soil bespattered understandings of our enemies. But an interesting thing about the Bible, and one of the arguments for its veracity, is we get the whole story. Read through the Book of Genesis sometime and see just how corrupt the heroes of the faith were – if you want to see people getting drunk or people sleeping with prostitutes who turn out to be their daughter in law, it’s all there. And today in our passage from Acts, St. Paul gets the whole Biblical treatment, we see the good and the bad. We are told that “[Paul] went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” That is the setup to the story. Paul, in his pre-conversion days, is working diligently to catch people who belong to the way (i.e., Christians) in the act of being Christian, so that he can lead them back in bondage to Jerusalem where they can be properly persecuted – fun stuff. And while Rick Steves might call this part of Paul’s professional career a misstep, the fact of the matter is Paul was doing a pretty rotten thing. And so that makes what happens next all the more remarkable.

We all probably know the story, even before we read it a few minutes ago. But basically, Paul appears to have gotten his letters and is nearing Damascus when we read, “A light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’" It’s kind of a big deal. From the perspective of early Christians Paul was the worst. He was a pharisee’s pharisee. He was like the puritan who laid awake at night unable to sleep because he knew that somewhere someone was dancing, except with Paul it was people being Christian. Paul could simply not exist in a world where there were Christians, until the moment we have today, when everything changed.

Now I think we can have interesting conversations about why Jesus specifically sought out Paul and employed such dramatic means for his conversion. Paul did end up writing about a third of the New Testament, so I think Jesus got his money’s worth out of today’s endeavor. But whatever the reason, I believe the most dramatic thing that this story embodies is not the blinding light or even the conversion of Saul (i.e., Paul), but the fact that Jesus went to Paul in the first place while being fully aware of who he was. He caught him in a moment just before he was going to do some persecuting. Paul had everything ready and was just a short distance away from where he planned to implement his oppressive actions. And so by choosing this moment Jesus announces to the world that things have really changed. When Jesus encounters Paul, in all of his hatred for Christianity, he does not smite him or have him die in a bizarre gardening accident, rather he shakes him out of the state he is in and allows him to see the truth of what has happened in the Resurrection. Jesus has not been told the Rick Steves’ version of Paul’s life prior, rather he sees it for what it really is and, in that moment, he chooses to show Paul that there is a path forward that is not dependent on who he was up to that point. In other words, there is true forgiveness of sin.

One thing that is somewhat new in our day and age is the social media record that follows many, particularly young people, around. It is a permanent record of momentary stupidity. When I was in high school and said something ill-advised or offensive my statement had a very small and local reach. Perhaps someone who heard me might share my comment with others, but even at its worst it never really reached beyond the campus of Bullard High School in Fresno, California. Now, with social media, we have the capability to not only know that today someone in Belgium said something stupid, but can search and find all of the times that person said something stupid. We can put their stupid comments in amber and use them as the defining feature of their existence. We don’t need to know anything more about them because we know about some imprudent remarks they made in the fall of 2015. And sadly, this is a fairly regular occurrence these days for someone to be outed for something stupid they did when they were fifteen. You hear stories of people not getting a job because the HR department did a little research and found some unflattering tweets from times long gone.

And if Jesus operated the way the world does there would have been no road to Damascus because Jesus would have known everything he needed to know about Paul. Paul was a rotten person and that is all he would ever be. I mean he had letters from the High Priests allowing him to persecute Christians – talk about being caught with your hand in the cookie jar. And if this happened in our day and age there would be no forgiveness because that kind of generosity and graciousness is not allowed in a world that ignores the message of the cross. Without the cross, life is about hoarding. We hoard our love and give it only to those we have judged worthy. Jesus had every reason to despise Paul. Paul was not just ignoring the Resurrection, but actively working to make sure that no one knew about it. He was like Scipio Africanus salting the fields of the Carthaginians so nothing would ever grow there again. But the cross says none of those things matters. It says you are forgiven for the person you were yesterday or in Paul’s case the person you were a few seconds ago. The message of the cross is hard because it asks us to let go of the thoughts and opinions we hold so dear. It makes us have to reckon with the fact that we are not all good nor are we all bad. We are instead people who make mistakes and do stupid and insensitive things, who are in desperate need of forgiveness. The rancor in this world is largely because it rejects the message of the cross. It rejects the idea that people are a mixture of good and bad who are in desperate need of forgiveness, so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.