



“Childhood Bible Stories: Paul Follows Jesus”

Acts 9:1-20

August 2, 2020

For eighty years now, *Christian Century* magazine has featured an occasional series entitled “How My Mind Has Changed” which asks pastors, theologians, writers, and thinkers to reflect on how their lives and convictions have been transformed by life experience. A few years ago, a collection of these essays was published in book form. I’ve enjoyed reading them and reflecting on the message they offer the church and all of us who seek to live faithfully. At one level, their very existence suggests, not unremarkably, that minds *can* change. Even thoughtful, faithful, and brilliant minds. Imagine that. In a time when ideological polarization has deepened distrust and intensified entrenched dogma, it is good to be reminded that to change is often to grow; to be open to transformation is a sign of life, and resistance to growth can be resistance to God’s living Spirit. In his essay for the series, poet Scott Cairns describes the transformation in his thinking that has taken place as a result of being part of *communities* of faith that have challenged his individualistic outlook. He closes the essay entitled “Lives Together” with powerful words: “As I continue to discover more fully day by day, this journey toward wholeness is not something that one is able to undertake alone. Fellow travelers aren’t simply a welcomed luxury; they are crucial to our bearing our crosses as we seek to follow God.”

If there were any doubts as to the truth of these words, the rollercoaster ride we’ve experienced this year should put them to rest. We have seen the power of what is possible when communities and even whole nations pull together to take lifesaving action for the good of the other, when diverse groups unite around the values that we proclaim to hold dear, when compassion outweighs competition or conquest. And, we have seen the devastating impact of loneliness, the

crushing burden of isolation, the destructive power of narrow self-interest. It’s been quite a year.

I’ve been thinking about this miraculous human capacity to change and this basic human need for fellow travelers as I’ve reflected on the story we just heard from the book of Acts. Without this story, those of us who read and study his letters might think of the Apostle Paul as a brilliant theologian, a caring pastor, a passionate preacher, and a faithful follower of Jesus. And, we would be right. But we would be missing so much of who he was, as he is deeply rooted in the journey that led him to this vocation. I *also* think we’d be missing an important part of his message to us, a message we find in this passage of scripture.

It begins with a man named Saul. Faithful and devout, fully committed to the purity of tradition. We meet him first as he watches over the coats of those who stoned Stephen for his public profession of faith in Jesus. Saul is proud to be there and supportive of the execution. In time, Saul himself becomes a passionate persecutor of Christians. Acts gives us an unambiguous picture, “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, committing them to prison.” That’s why he is going to Damascus that fateful day, to find followers of the Way, early Christians, and bring them to Jerusalem for trial.

His story takes a radical turn on the road to Damascus. Without warning, a light from heaven flashes around him, Saul falls to the ground, a voice calls out, “Saul, Saul...why do you persecute me?” Saul has studied his scripture. He’s heard stories of divine intervention, many of which involve blinding lights and booming voices. So he asks, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” At

that, Saul loses his eyesight *and* his appetite.

Saul's is a dramatic and total conversion. We teach it to our children to remind them that God's love can change us—that the story of our lives is not limited to the actions of our past. As Bryan Stevenson writes in his powerful book *Just Mercy* (so beautifully lifted up last week by Rev. Madison VanVeelen), "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." Can we believe that this is true? So it is with Saul. He had been pursuing and condemning those whom he believed to be the enemies of God. In so doing, he had become an enemy of God's expansive grace. It was that grace that found him on the road, that picked him up and turned him around, that changed him at the very core of who he was. This is a story of how grace changes us. We should not forget it. People of Christian faith are not given the luxury of giving up on anyone, and we tell this story to underscore that truth. We don't get to draw the lines of God's redeeming love. I will never forget the words of a mentor, an Old Testament professor and minister, now in his nineties. I was a college sophomore, struggling with questions of how to know who belongs and where to draw lines of exclusion. In classic Socratic form, Dr. Wintermute simply asked: "Well, do you think it is possible to overestimate the love of God?" The answer, Paul learns, is no. When we presume to draw dividing lines around God's love, we are missing the mark. Change, like redemption, is never beyond reach.

Sometimes, change means transforming the way we live our lives, trading hatred for love, and violence for proclamation of peace. And sometimes, it means opening our closed mind to God's refreshing grace. Ananias. A faithful disciple of Jesus, a follower of the Way. God calls and he answers as the ancient prophets did, saying, "Here I am, Lord." God then gives Ananias very clear directions: take Straight street to Judas' house and look for a man from Tarsus, with the name of Saul. He'll be looking for you. Well, Ananias has heard stories about Saul of Tarsus. He has heard of the violent persecutions of Christians and Saul's starring role. Ananias must have wondered what in

the world God was thinking. This instruction seemed both foolish and dangerous. And so, without directly declining (he is speaking to God, after all), Ananias makes sure to clarify the command from God. *You mean, that Saul?*

Yes. That Saul. God means to transform two souls, and so the Lord responds: "Go...I've chosen Saul as an instrument of proclamation. Trust me." And, in that encounter, Ananias is converted. Verse thirteen: "Lord, I have heard about *this man*." Verse seventeen: "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me to you." From skepticism to acceptance, from fear to hospitality, from other to brother. Scales fall from two sets of eyes that day.

What are we to learn from the conversion of Saul and the call of Ananias? Perhaps, I think, it depends where we find ourselves in the story. All summer, we have been reading these wonderful Bible stories that many of us first learned as children. Perhaps we have discovered again that storytelling is the most powerful means of sharing our faith, that these ancient chronicles are not so ancient after all.

Sometimes, like Saul, we need the blinding light and the booming voice. We need a total change of heart. We need to be turned around, reset, transformed. Saul's story reminds us that we never fall beyond the safety net of God's grace. It is never too late for us to turn our lives around or commit ourselves afresh to what matters the most.

Sometimes, like Ananias, we need the firm command to open our hearts to a new possibility. The one whom you have labeled an enemy of God can teach you something about God's grace, expand your worldview, widen your perspective on God's unconditional love.

In both stories, we find testimony to the truth that change is possible. You don't have to be forever who you've been until now. That's the gospel truth. So is this: the challenging journey of transformative faith is not one we undertake alone. We require the presence of others, the gifts they bring, the support they offer,

the opportunities they present.

And so, the more I read this story, the more convinced I become that conversion is not only about a singular moment that occurs once in a lifetime. It is not the 100M race before an audience of millions, it is not having the gold medal placed around our neck. Conversion is a practice, a lifelong commitment, a never-ending possibility. Conversion is what happens when God's life and our lives become joined on a common journey. Conversion is the story of our lives.

What is your conversion story? Sometimes, it comes in the voice of a friend who calls at exactly the right moment. Sometimes, it arrives in the striking beauty of a sunrise you almost didn't wake up to see. Sometimes, you find it in the kindness of a stranger, hear it in the power of a song, watch it in tears of grief or gladness. My experiences of conversions are too numerous to name, each one drawing me a bit closer to the reality of God, or offering assurance in a time of need. Christians, like churches and trees, are not alive if they are not growing.

Without a bit of doubt, I can tell you that Second Presbyterian Church is alive. For twenty-one weeks, we have worshipped in this different way. We've adapted and stretched in ways we didn't know were possible. We've experienced frustration, exasperation, anxiety, and even some anger. We're not unique in those experiences—I can assure you of that. And yet, through it all, I have seen this venerable church find its way in new ways. I've Zoomed with a group of men in their eighties, studied scripture with members scattered around the country, and enjoyed virtual happy hour trivia games with staff. We've changed because we've had to change. Here's my pastoral counsel—let's not lose sight of what we've learned, what we're still learning, about ourselves and our God in the crucible of this daunting year. If we're not changing, we've stopped living. If we're not open, God will find a way to pry us open. Conversion is a

gift to welcome and an invitation to accept.

Twelve years ago, today, on August 2, 2008 (my father-in-law will tell you it was the hottest day of the year in eastern Kansas), Sara and I spoke vows of commitment to one another and our dear friend Jay McKell spoke words of affirmation that joined our lives in marriage. In that one moment, a transformation took place. One minute, we weren't married, the next we were. All at once. Just like that.

Of course, that only tells one part of the story. Commitment, like conversion, offers the gift of gradual transformation. Twelve years later, I am a different person because of that moment *and* because of the 4,384 days since then. I pray that I am wiser and more faithful, that my heart and mind have been broadened by offering them to another. So it is with the journey of faith—for people and for churches. We change. Sometimes all at once. Sometimes with gradual recognition.

After reflecting on her conversion story, writer Anne Lamott writes “I do not at all understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.”ⁱ May it be so for you, for our church, for this whole beautiful and broken world. Amen.

ⁱ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, 143.