

Sermon: May 1, 2016 – Acts 9: 1-6, 19b-22

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

I'm going to start today's message with a straw poll: how many of you have had a situation in life where you got so caught up in details or intensity of a situation that was right in front of you, that you lost sight of the big picture? Me too.

There's a saying that goes back at least five centuries: "cannot see the forest for the trees" and it comes into play over and over again as we seek to live lives of meaning. The demands of the moment are so immediate that we lose sight of the bigger goals. This plays out over and over again on stages big and small: the special project at work that becomes bigger than the core vision of the enterprise; the Little League coach so focused on being competitive that the more important life-lessons of sportsmanship get set aside; the couple so focused on the wedding that little thought is given to the marriage; the boardroom that allows a financial bottom line to compromise the sustainability of the planet; and so much from the world of parenting, the series of dramas and battles and worries that unfold between parent and child, that get so much bigger than they really are. We get so personally invested in the situation that is right in front of us, that we fail to take a step back and see that there are bigger, more important themes to be addressed.

Keeping the broader picture in view can be hard work but it can also bring great joy. One of those joys, I articulate on the second Sunday of each month when we celebrate the sacrament of communion. I remind us that this table is not the table of RCMUC or of the United Church of Canada, but is the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, and as such it is Christ's invitation to table, not mine. We are invited to a meal of joy and reconciliation by the One who affirms the personhood of those who are without hope, as we heard in today's reading from John. But the flip side of that invitation, is an acknowledgement that in everything we say and do, we do so as part of that mystical entity we call "the body of Christ." What we do within these four walls is not isolated from our participation in the United Church of Canada, nor is it dissociated from our connection to Christ's body as expressed in acts of love in Christian Churches around the world. Nobody is insisting that we our theology and actions must be identical to the words and deeds of other congregations, but we do need to see ourselves as part of something much bigger than ourselves: that being, the living, breathing body of Christ, as expressed by a wonderful diversity of believers around the world. In my practice of Ministry, every so often I need to take one giant step back, look at what I am saying and the actions that we are or are not expressing as a congregation, and ask, "do these words and actions build up the body of Christ?" And if the answer is "no," then something's gotta change.

Perhaps the most dramatic story of someone being confronted to take a new, bigger view on things, is today's account from the 9th chapter of Acts, of an eager but low-ranking persecutor named Saul being confronted by the risen Christ. Calvin Roetzel, analyzing the positions of several other scholars, writes that Saul's opposition to the spread of Christian ideas within Judaism was both theological and political. Theological, in that Saul and his compatriots equated following Jesus with anarchy, a rejection of the well-codified systems of law found in the Hebrew Scriptures and traditions in favour of something new and wrong. Political, in that these words of Jesus were causing huge social upheaval, women and slaves and outsiders of all sorts starting to understand themselves as fully human and fully loved, and this change in tone was starting to draw unwanted attention from the Romans. The Jewish leadership had worked hard to become basically invisible in the eyes of Rome, and this Jesus nonsense threatened to ruin all that.

Saul – firm, devout, single-minded - was on his way to Damascus to continue this religious cleansing when he was met by the risen Christ on the road, knocked to the ground and temporarily blinded. Saul was forced to take one giant step back and to begin seeing the bigger agenda of Christ Jesus in all of this: and that is, an unfolding agenda of forgiveness, reconciliation, inclusion and love, not just for his own people but for the benefit of the whole world. Saul, now Paul, was charged with re-deploying his energies to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. It may not be accurate to call this a "conversion" – Krister Stendahl reminds us that Saul/Paul never ceased being a committed Jew, he simply accepted Jesus as the Messiah within his Judaism – but it most definitely was a transformation that changed his deepest attitudes and actions. and revealed to him a new vocation that would shape the rest of his life.

While not used much these days in popular writing, the image of someone having a "Damascus Road" experience was at one time a well-understood metaphor for someone whose life was turned upside-down, for the better. But Paul's Damascus Road experience is not just an analogy or metaphor for a big

life change. These kinds of confrontations between God, our source and destination, and us mere mortals do actually happen and it is on my heart to tell you about one such encounter.

In March of 1980, a boy of 19 had his sleep interrupted by a vision. Not a dream, a vision. In this vision, a peaceful and compassionate God made it clear that there was now a call placed upon this boy's life: he was to minister to others. As is always the case, the boy immediately wanted more clarity: was this a call to "The Ministry" or was this a call to continue on his present course of University training, and to apply Christ's ethical standards to that line of work. God did not offer such clarity, only underlined what had already been said. A call to minister had been issued, and it was up to the boy to figure out the shape of it.

That boy, of course, now stands before you. Church leadership was not part of my plans when I was 19 but God – the personal expression of holy love that knows us, encourages us and calls us by name – had other plans. So by age 21, armed with a grand total of three religious studies courses and some of my Dad's old theology books, I headed off to test my call in the United Church pulpits of Eastend and Shaunavon, Saskatchewan. As you know, it has not been a straight road from there to here, with a period of twelve years in which it was important that I do something else, but I am so thankful for my Damascus Road experience, which jarred me out of one pattern of life into something that has brought such blessings.

Something I learned early on that journey, is the purpose of what one does from a pulpit. My role with you, always, is to give room for you to see God's bigger picture for your life. If your faith is closed or rigid, I hope to bring you some new thoughts that will open up some new ways for God to be present to you. If you are socially progressive but don't see how that connects with your Christian beliefs, I hope to help you make the connections, thereby deepening your commitment to social justice and expanding your faith. If you have more doubt than faith, my goal is for you to feel okay about sitting with those doubts but also for you to find trusted companions who will help you emerge from doubt to faith. And within that, I hope that I am giving you room for the word "God" to mean whatever moves you forward, everything from a traditional understanding of a separate and personified God to an understanding of God as the force of truth and goodness that permeates the universe and motivates us to be people of kindness and courage. In the words of the hymn we sung earlier this morning, we are indeed "fellow travelers on the road" as we give one another permission to explore, to doubt, and to believe.

It is so hard for us to know within the United Church of Canada, where the appropriate limits are when it comes to our faith and practice. We work so hard at giving one another this permission to explore and doubt and believe that it's hard to know where we would place the boundaries beyond which a Minister or congregation simply doesn't "belong" any more, or is there such a place? For example, a few of you have expressed to me your strong beliefs regarding the ministry of Rev. Gretta Vosper, Minister of West Hill United Church in Toronto, who identifies herself as an Atheist. While it's fair to say that the majority of what I've heard is, "why would you want to call yourself a Minister in a Christian Church if you don't believe in God" I have also heard reasonable presentations of why we need Gretta's voice in the Church.

Much of what could be said would be better said over a cup of coffee than from a pulpit, and I do invite that if this is a heavy topic for you. This morning, I'm going to confine myself to two brief comments.

The first thing I'd say, is everything I've said thus far in this sermon:

- ❖ the need for every Church and Minister, including Rev. Gretta and West Hill, to regularly evaluate our Ministries as either building up or diminishing the Body of Christ, and we need to be able to use that language;
- ❖ the need to ensure fair process, acting in the Christ-affirming spirit of Paul the liberator rather than the protective spirit of Saul the persecutor. I believe the Church has done this, but within that I acknowledge that Rev. Gretta has been very forthright with her congregation, that they have been very supportive of her, and I hope that some sort of relationship can continue, though that may need to be something other than a usual Minister & Congregation covenant;
- ❖ and the need to make sure that United Churches are places that give the freedom to doubt and the freedom to believe. I do fear that in taking such a firm stance against the existence of God, that spectrum of expression may actually have been narrowed at West Hill.

But the main thing I need to bring forward, is a deep sadness. I am always saddened when a person arrives at the conclusion that there is no God. I am saddened when young people who have never had direct dealings with Church reject it outright, either because the concept of God as it has been explained to them does not make sense, or because of the amount of violence that has been unleashed in the world in God's name. I am saddened when long-time Church members stop relating to God, simply because of something that went sour in their relationship with the Church. And at the risk of coming off as patronizing, I am saddened when any Ministry colleague arrives at the conclusion that their life, the life of their congregation or the life of the world would be better off without a conception of a personal and loving God, for I see such diminishment in lives that actively attempt to exclude the activity of the Holy.

But this sermon isn't about Gretta and it shouldn't be about Greg, either; it's about the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and that's where I'd like to end. I give thanks for our family connection to the Church of Jesus Christ in all its varieties. I give thanks for Churches deeply involved in making the world a better place. I give thanks for those who ask hard questions of scripture, from outside the Church and within. I give thanks for what we learn from doubt and what we gain from belief. I give thanks for the transformative power of Jesus Christ, which has made such a difference in the lives of those who are open to be changed. And I pray: for Christians and those of other faith traditions, for believers and non-believers, that the Good News of God's reconciling love will find a home in all hearts and all lives. In the name of the same Christ our Lord, Amen.

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