

**Sermon: May 5, 2019 – Acts 9: 1-6 and John 21: 1-14**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

This morning feels very much like the first school day back after an extended summer holiday, with the task in front of me the classic “What I did on my summer vacation” assignment. And I suspect that parts of sermons for months to come, will have a bit of that sense to them, because the three month sabbatical I’ve just completed was rich and diverse and profound. It was a time for refreshment of body, mind and spirit, for new places and new learnings, for revisiting old places and delving into ancient learnings. And I do need to express a profound thank-you to the Council and congregation and to Rev. Bill Millar, for making it so easy to be away for a time of Sabbath rest and renewal.

The first book I read while on sabbatical was a slim little book that I didn’t even know I had, *Journeying toward Renewal* by Melissa Bane Sevier. I was familiar with Melissa’s work from a very fine worship blog she writes each week, but this book was all about her Ministry sabbatical back in 2001, and within the first few pages she had shared this pearl of wisdom: when deciding what to include in your sabbatical, have things *that make your heart sing*, and things that *prepare you for change*. Her book also recommended doing a whole lot of nothing, especially at the beginning and the end of the sabbatical. I definitely took her advice, with a good balance of heart-song activities and events, ample amounts of dawdling and relaxing and day after day when the agenda looked like this <blank>. By contrast, not much of what I built into my plan explicitly related to change, but fortunately God looked after that part, uncovering connections and challenges and new sources of motivation as we move into this next time together.

Our two scripture lessons this morning, in very different ways, are about change. The first reading we heard today, was the conversion/transformation of Saul the persecutor, into Paul the apostle. Professor Amy Oden suggests we take another look at this story, starting by re-framing some of the language I just used. She writes,

“Saul... sees Jesus’ followers as those within his own faith needing rescue from their error. He asks for letters to the synagogues in Damascus that will give him authority ...to clean up his own faith community and rid it of the straying, unrighteous ones.” As far as he is concerned, this is not a matter of going after people just to persecute them, but rather a *correction*.

“Rather than portraying Saul as a persecutor, we might see him as a committed son of the covenant, someone trying to do the right thing in order to strengthen the people of God....We might hunch, then, that Saul is shocked not only by the flashing light, but by the accusation of persecution, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ (verse 4) We might imagine Saul can hardly believe his ears, thinking, ‘Who? Me? A persecutor?’ This is not Saul’s story about himself. [Yet] his one-track focus on righteousness narrows rather than expands his vision of what God is up to. He is so convinced of the error of others that he cannot see the new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ and mis-reads it completely.”

God saw in Saul both the destructiveness of his present path, and tremendous potential to forward the loving, inclusive mission of Jesus Christ, and in a moment of terrifying clarity gave Saul – now Paul, Apostle of Christ – the ability to see it, too. The challenge, of course, is that Paul would need to let go of many of the things that Saul held as most important. Paul would need to forget or at least question some of the truths that Saul held as absolutely correct and completely beyond challenge. Paul would need to open himself to God’s winds of reconciliation and change, “get over himself” as it were, in order to catch the energy of the Spirit pushing him in new and unexpected directions.

If I really try to enter into this story and see it from Saul’s point of view, as Amy suggests, the type of change suggested is made even harder because from Saul’s standpoint, his present

course of action was following an “onward and upward” trajectory, a process of continuous improvement where he kept growing in knowledge and wisdom and, likely, perceiving himself as more and more esteemed in God’s eyes. And to this process – and its attendant pride – Christ said, “not so fast now, Saul” and knocked him to his knees. Because Saul’s commitment to “being right” kept him from perceiving God’s desire for broadening the circle, reconciling, renewing. Saul had only one framework and anything outside that framework was to be opposed, with violence if needed. And to this, Jesus said to Saul, and says to anyone who takes up the tools of exclusion and violence in God’s name, “no.”

Without knowing it, the God-view that Saul was working with, was the view of a small God getting smaller. Saul’s understanding of God needed heavy monitoring to make sure that everyone was living their lives within tightly-defined zones, whereas the God of the universe, the source of each breath and each heartbeat and each sunrise is quite the opposite of that. And in the midst of Saul’s mission of narrowing down the group to only the purest of the pure, the risen Christ stopped him in his tracks, and showed him the light of a God whose circle of care is broad and supportive and creative and invitational. By his own standards of measurement, Saul’s previous agenda was going well, but the Christ who had been crucified by that same agenda and rose above it, showed Paul a more excellent way.

The other scene we visit this morning, is a beloved tale from the collection of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. The disciples are out fishing and have had no success whatsoever. In the wee hours of the morning, a stranger from the shore shouts out a negatively-worded question they didn’t want to answer: “have you no fish?” “No.” came the terse reply. “Well, how about casting your nets on the other side of the boat” suggested the spectator on the shore.

Now, no Bible translation I have encountered has included a verbal reply to this suggestion, but I have a hard time imagining a boatload of expert fisherfolk just remaining silent at this moment, no matter how exhausted they were. Start with something like “no, since you’re the expert, how about you swim out here and recast our nets” augmented by some good salty language from a boatload of sailors, and I think we’d be close to the unrecorded verbal reply. But what the Bible does note, is that the nets were recast on the other side of the boat, with amazing results, 153 large fish, enough to nearly swamp them. And from there, the stranger on the shore is recognized as Christ Jesus, arisen, and a wonderful scene ensues with Jesus and his closest friends reuniting around a charcoal fire, with fish for breakfast.

We would, of course, be mistaken if we saw this story in isolation from another gospel story. Right at the beginning of his ministry, when Jesus called the fishermen Andrew and John to be disciples, he told them that if they followed him he would show them how to catch people – “I will make you fishers of men,” (Matthew 4: 19) to hearken back to the old language of a Sunday School song. As much as Jesus was and is concerned about the actual daily living conditions of human beings, this gospel story of fishing from the other side of the boat is a metaphor or parable for the mission of the Church, and the need for those of us engaged in that mission to question our wisdom and be open to God’s new perspectives, like the one offered by that stranger on the shore. Jesus breaks open scarcity and replaces it with abundance, by calling the fisherfolk to try something new – to rely on God’s wisdom rather than their own.

Unlike the story of Saul being shown a new way, this story does not begin with a mis-aimed life goal. The people on this boat weren’t making life difficult for anyone, (other than the fish, I suppose); their daily routines weren’t fueled by a harmful view of God. But they, like Saul, leaned too much on their expertise, their knowledge of how they’d always done things. To this, Jesus says, “you know, there can be a fresh abundance to be found in new perspectives and new approaches. Letting go of your ego-involvement in perpetuating the old ways, can open you and those around you, to experiencing God in new ways.”

Like Saul's transformation into Paul the apostle, there is quite a bit of unlearning to be done in the act of re-casting the nets. It's not that the fishermen had no knowledge, it was their reliance on what they thought was the only truth that was limiting their range – and, if we understand fishing in this story, as equated to evangelism, limiting God's range.

Five years ago, in response to General Council 41, a bold and visionary report was released by The United Church of Canada entitled, "Fishing on the Other Side." That report called on the Church to consider far-reaching reforms to the way we structure ourselves, the way that Ministers are supported and supervised, the way that we finance Mission and outreach in the Church. Congregations, including Ralph Connor, studied that report and gave feedback, and two General Councils later a number of its recommendations are being implemented. So now, every dollar you give to the Mission and Service line on your offering envelope (or by pre-authorized remittance) goes to Mission, and Service, while funding the administrative structures of the Church (which used to be included in M&S) is now a budget line for local congregations. Now, money being freed up for new ventures and new ways of "being Church", through a program called "Embracing the Spirit". And perhaps most importantly, congregations – which have additional autonomy and additional responsibilities - are now being challenged to really engage the communities around them, not just in a "how can we get more of those fishies into the boat" kind of way, but in a "how can we be of service to the community? How can we and our community embrace God's tangible, existential love for ALL people and all of creation?" These *new ways of being* for the Church, founded in this metaphor of casting our nets into new and unknown waters rather than fishing the same old waters in the same old ways, also invokes the story of Saul/Paul, making sure that our congregations are founded in expansive love rather than defending more narrow self-understandings. And as an aside, Bible commentators as early as St. Jerome in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, suggested that the reason why John specifies 153 fish rather than just "a whole bunch", is to denote the number of fish species in Galilee and, by extension, all the known peoples of the world – which underlines some of the intercultural perspectives that Bill Millar was sharing with you these past three months. God's love reaches beyond any barriers and boundaries, *especially those we are most comfortable with*, pushing us to embrace all people and indeed all of creation, as our kin.

That message of expansive love kept coming up time and time again in my sabbatical. Starting back in the fall, when we did a cross-border book study (of *Speaking Christian*) with our partners in Wisconsin, we encountered Marcus Borg's insistence that the old familiar heaven-and-hell framework blocks us from perceiving and embracing God's mission of love. The Universal Christ conference that Shannon and I attended in Albuquerque, based on Richard Rohr's book of the same title, was all about the God who is universal and infinite, whose desire for love and life pulsates through all of life, if only we would recognize it. And Malcolm Guite, the speaker each day in Holy Week at Norwich Cathedral, spoke of the mission of Jesus as the work of barrier-breaking, tearing down all exclusive, limiting structures in favour of a God whose love knows no boundaries. So I return to Ministry with you, more convinced than ever of the life-force of love which we know as God, reaching into the shadows of our lives with new light, inhabiting our very lives as a life-force of love, urging us as individuals and as faith communities to set aside anything and everything that would block the power of love from motivating each belief, each choice, each action. Like the apostle Paul and the discouraged fisherfolk, need to stay open to Christ, who challenges what we think we know about life's limitations, bringing us up close to God's creative urge of invitation and wholeness and life in all abundance.

This is no small thing being asked of us. Christ is well-aware of how much loss is involved, in letting go of familiar ways and comfortable limitations, for every time there is change to something new, there is a letting go of what had been. But as we continue to investigate what it would mean, to be more explicitly affirming of the LGBTQ2 community and more broadly

inclusive of all who are marginalized; as we continue to take a good hard look at how this building enables mission or stunts mission; as we find ways to make ourselves vulnerable to new people and new perspectives and new approaches, by letting God's love have free reign in this place, we will open ourselves to new life that is so real in Christ Jesus.

Whether it's a blinding light that knocks us off our feet, or a casual suggestion that's worth a try, there are new things in store for us. May we be open, even eager, in our response. Amen.

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