

Sermon: May 1, 2022 – Acts 9: 1-19**Rev Greg Wooley: preached at Rundle Memorial United Church, Banff AB**

There are few things more inspiring to me, than stories of radical transformation. You know, the stories of a person whose prior choices were destructive to themselves and those around them, whose life turned around into one that was life-giving and admirable. Or, on a group level, stories of feisty resilience and grass-roots changes that have transformed the life of a troubled neighbourhood, institution, or nation. Perhaps it's just because I enjoy "underdog" stories, but I think it's more than that; I think it's because they speak of a world where life-giving change is possible, where hope can and does become an embodied reality.

This morning we heard the story of Saul's Damascus Road experience: enroute to engage in more fierce persecution of the early Church, specifically Jews who now followed the ways of Jesus, he was knocked to the ground and confronted by none less than the Risen Christ. Literally "blinded by the light", he was nursed to health and emerged as a new person, with a new mission: Saul the persecutor of the Church was now Paul, apostle of the Church. And if you hear me flip-flopping between the two names Saul and Paul throughout the sermon, not to worry: it's the same individual, just before & after this conversion.

When I read this account from the book of Acts, it's clear that the author, wants us to contrast the passionately violent actions of Saul, persecutor of Jewish Christians, with the passionately committed person that Saul becomes in the person of Paul the Apostle, evangelist for Christ's reconciling grace. In the life narrative of Saul/Paul we are shown the destructive power of arrogant hatred, in contrast to the transformative love of Jesus.

It's hard to know with any degree of certainty, just how nasty this Saul fellow actually was prior to his conversion experience. Acts pulls no punches: it speaks in chapters 7 and 8 (7:58-8:1) of Saul's assistance in the stoning of the Apostle Stephen, tending the cloaks of those who killed this man.

In his own words, Paul admits (see Philippians 3), with no small amount of regret and shame, that he did indeed persecute these Christ-followers, but outside the book of Acts we have no indication of his participation in killings. But regardless of the extent of his violence against the early Christians we can surmise that Saul, a very learned person, a member of the Pharisees, had understood his knowledge of scripture and his devotion to God to be all the justification he needed to make life unbearable for those he regarded as infidels. He was unrelenting in his insistence that they abandon these ways, and return to the true religion, exactly as *he* believed it.

In his own writings, Paul makes no specific mention of the Damascus Road experience, though he does write about his personal, face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15, Galatians 1). Following this experience, Saul is a completely new person: no longer Saul, but Paul. No longer persecutor of Christ, but now an ambassador for Christ.

As mentioned earlier, I am always drawn to stories of these kinds of conversion-for-the-better, in literature, in movies, in real life, heck, even when there's a turnaround in the world of sports. God was able to take the best qualities of Saul – his knowledge of scripture, his determination, his persuasive way with words – and use those for the betterment of others. At the same time, Paul freely admits the arrogance that used to fuel him, and contrasts that with what he calls the "foolishness" of the cross (1 Cor 1:18), the way that God's actual wisdom puts human self-important wisdom to shame. In order to be transformed from who he

was before and what he did before, to the mission that God was now calling/sending him to, Paul's strengths would be utilized and his arrogance would be cast aside.

One of the places in modern life where many of us will have seen amazing turnarounds, is in the lives of people suffering from addiction, who have found a twelve-step program that helps them deconstruct their old ways, and commit to new ways. The first of those steps is to recognize that one's life is unmanageable, the second step is to "believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity". Confronted by God on the Damascus road, Paul in essence realized his addiction to being right, how crazed his life was, the arrogant Pharisaism that he was addicted to. He recognized the risen Christ, and the new path that Christ was inviting him to. And if we want to go one step further, in the self-awareness of some of his letters, it's as if Paul is writing a journal of how he, with God, keeps on working the steps to keep him on track and healthy. Occasionally Paul makes huge missteps, and occasionally the Church has used his words in very hurtful ways, but even that strikes me as someone working the steps. Getting it right, getting it wrong, re-turning to God.

Dutch Sociologist Hans Mol, a professor of Religious Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton for many years, had a somewhat different model. He outlined the stages that one tends to go through when undergoing cultural, social or religious transformation. The four stages identified by Professor Mol are: (Willimon, pp. 79-80)

1. Detachment from former patterns of identity
2. A time of meaninglessness and anomie.
3. A dramatic transition from darkness to light, from chaos to meaning.
4. The faith community supports and accepts the initiate into their life together.

These four steps are well applied to the conversion of Paul, perhaps in a slightly different order. He is confronted with the meaninglessness and harmfulness of his present ways, he literally goes from seeing to not seeing to seeing again, he is nursed back to health by Ananias, he leaves his life as Saul the Pharisee and emerges as Paul the Christ-follower.

So there you have it: Saul, persecutor becomes Paul, evangelist. Prideful, perfect Saul takes on the humility of Christ, becomes in his own words a "fool" for Christ. And let's not miss or minimize the role of Ananias: this passage from the book of Acts specifically spotlights this person. He must have been fearful of what might happen once Saul regained his sight, but nonetheless tended to him with loving care. If you were to think that the book of Acts included this story of Ananias and his courageous care of an enemy as an example of how the Church should act, showing love no matter what the circumstances, you'd be right.

It would be easy now to tie the sermon up with a bow and sing the next hymn, but something deeply troubles me, and it's this: we are told in no uncertain terms how terrible it was for Saul to persecute and demean people, even to the point of killing, and if we read on in the book of Acts (14:19) we read of the bravery of Paul, holding to the gospel of love even when threatened and beaten and imprisoned. Acts could not be clearer in the contrast between the previous ways of Saul, and the new ways of Paul.

And yes, there have been and continue to be times when the Church has modeled this steadfast love, communities of faith offering brave, inclusive love without fanfare, Christian hospitals and medical missions reaching into communities that others would not touch, congregations and denominations unwilling to let intolerance go unchallenged.

Yet if we scan the life of the Church over the centuries, far too often we have seen actions that mimic the arrogance and violence of Saul, rather than the humility and reconciling grace

elucidated by Paul. Over the centuries we call “Christendom” when Church has happily colluded with power, we have often seen Christianity acting just like Saul. Convinced of its rightness, and the error of those who think in any other way, Church and State together invented sinful, ridiculous modes of thought like the Doctrine of Discovery to deny the personhood of non-Christians, especially first peoples, and to give the Church and the Crown carte blanche. I see no substantive difference between these actions taken against Indigenous peoples, or Church-led denials of women’s rights and gay and trans rights, and Saul the Pharisee chasing down the early Christians. At times I wonder if parts of the Church have viewed the conversion of Saul to Paul, not as a complete upheaval of who he was and how he acted, but simply as Saul realizing he had been aiming at the wrong target: stopping his persecution of Jewish converts to Christianity, but then finding someone else to persecute. But that’s not how God acts in this world... that’s not what conversion, from ways of death to ways of life looks like... that’s not how the integrating, including, reconciling love of Christ acts in relation to others, EVER.

As those who have given ourselves to the ways of Christ, we are called away from ridiculing, demeaning or dismissing people whose sacred path is different from ours. We are called away from a pride that blinds us to the wisdom of other people, other traditions, other ways of loving the ways of God. We are called to be the human embodiment of the gracious, humble love of Christ. We are called to repentance, at the ways in which Christ’s boundless love has been weaponized. We are drawn to love the curious, complex diversity of this world and those who dwell therein. And we consider the possibility of conversion, for ourselves, for our Churches, for our society: away from Christian entitlement, and towards the humility of Jesus.

In today’s reading from Acts, we see the contrast between the passionately violent actions of Saul, persecutor of Jewish Christians, and the passionately committed person that Saul becomes in the person of Paul the Apostle, evangelist for Christ’s reconciling love. We are shown the destructive power of arrogant hatred, contrasted with the love of Ananias that nursed someone who had declared himself a sworn enemy, back to health. And we are challenged to be the people who keep returning to Christ’s message of difficult, challenging, amazing love, even when we are tired, even when we are conflicted, even when we have our doubts. May our lives and the lives of these congregations, be shaped and enlivened by the power of God’s own humble, ever-present, profound and wonderful love. Amen.

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