

Chosen for a Purpose
from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Reading: Acts 9:1-19a

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Our preacher friend, William Willimon, who preached here last October, reminds us of something Flannery O'Connor once said of Paul's Damascus road experience. She said: "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse."¹

By all accounts it was a dramatic moment for Saul, as he was called, and converted by God. He turned from *prosecutor* of the faithful Christians to *defender* of the Christian faith. This is the man who had provided crowd control on the day the apostle Stephen was stoned to death. This is the Jew, Saul, who made it his personal mission to make life impossible for Christians in the formative days of the church. This is a man who is definitely the prime example of one who is an enemy of the church. He hated Christians, yet he was one whom God chose to live

¹ Flannery O'Connor. *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 355.

as the Apostle Paul and write some of the most beloved letters in all of the New Testament.

Saul was a bully and I doubt that any of us would have liked him much. He was hostile toward the new Christians and he had the power with which to make their lives miserable. He was “the enemy” and none of the people who were in the Christian minority there liked him. Instead, they feared him.

Why, then, would God have chosen such a figure to be the leader who later, as Paul, obeyed God, wrote eloquently of faith, hope and love after being instrumental in founding young churches throughout southern Asia? We don't really know the answer to that question any more than we know the ways of God in any of our lives. But what we do know is that it happened and that once he was called by God, the former persecutor of Jesus and the church became the great preacher and evangelist in the church.

We like stories of conversion. They say to us that God is still calling the shots. Such stories assure us that even the most inveterate scoundrel can be re-directed if someone can just figure out how to turn up the power to move that individual. History is filled with examples of people whose lives have taken a 180 degree turn for the better way. But the best examples are the ones we have witnessed personally: the neighbor who learns to love the kids in the neighborhood that he used to ignore; the fundamentalist who becomes a great liberal preacher; the

woman who reads her own obituary when it was really her less famous sister who had died. This is such a close call yet, a second chance, that she takes it as a divine intervention and dedicates her life to serving those in need. Up until then she was going to be remembered, according to the obituary, for being little more than one who gave parties. She was un-like the woman in a *New Yorker* “News Break” – those little reprints of typos – from newspapers. It told of a correction that ran in a newspaper in Dallas: “In Wednesday’s Metro section, Norma Adams-Wade’s column incorrectly called Mary Ann Thompson-Frenk a socialist. She is a socialite.” (Well, we can’t all be reformers.)

You probably know someone in whose life God is credited with intervening, pointing that person’s head in a new direction and giving him the wherewithal “to make something of his life”, as my grandmother used to say. “Yes, sir: What that boy needs is a good kick in the You-Know-What to get him on a new path. Then he might have a chance of Making Something Of Himself.” I always wondered who it was that might come along and be powerful enough to make that kick. It just didn’t seem like something God would do. But then, come to think of it, who would have thought God would knock somebody off his horse? Or make him blind for three days just to get his attention while God spoke to him?

This conversion business is familiar but still it’s strange. One thing is certain: in a genuine intervention that results in conversion, the central

subject doesn't do this himself. This is not like changing one's mind. This is an objective, documented, usually loud or demonstrative moment that comes from beyond us.

If you will allow reference to a young potential minister's conversion, I am reminded of Peter Marshall's story he later recalled in a sermon, "The Tap on the Shoulder". In it he tells how he thought he heard God call his name one night out as he was walking on the moors in his native Scotland. He was so startled by what he thought he heard that it made him stumble and fall to the ground, face down, arms before him to break the fall. It was difficult to see in the dark with no moon, but as he fell ahead in preparation for standing, he realized he was on the very edge of a deep hole in the moor's vast expanse. One more step and he would have fallen to his death. He took it as a sign that God had something for him to do beyond that place. In the months that followed, through prayerful discernment, he found himself considering a vocation in the church, eventually coming to America to attend Columbia Seminary on scholarship in the late 1920s. Years later he served a church in Washington, DC and was also Chaplain of the Senate. After his death while still in his fifties, his wife, Catherine, made his story famous with the publication of *A Man Called Peter*, and other books.

II

The commentaries on this text seem to make a distinction about the next move in our story. The distinction is that *Christ* is given the role as *intermediary* as Saul makes the move to becoming Paul.²

Beginning with the line, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” we hear Luke making the story more accessible to us, more human with a dialogue between Saul and Christ, more prayer-like with reference to Christ as “Lord”. Again, the importance given to the divine initiative, Christ’s initiative in this case, stands out. Christ takes charge of the conversion. This is something that originates at the divine level with Christ, not at the human level alone with Saul or Paul. *God in Christ makes the choice of Saul to launch a new chapter in the life of the church and to become one of our first theologians.* It isn’t the first time that God has chosen a reprobate to be a channel for revealing God’s purpose in the world.

I hesitate to begin naming figures from literature and the theatre and beyond for fear of leaving out your favorites. But perhaps it is enough to say that from the time of the Greek tragedies to the present we have seen some of the most unlikely dramatic figures come forward as the ones who stand in the limelight as representative heroic figures moving far beyond reprobate status. Look to Hamlet. Look to Lear’s daughter, Cordelia. Look to the Merchant of Venice and so many more

² Willimon

in Shakespeare. Look to the figures in a Damon Runyon play or a Stephan Sodheim musical to hear truth coming forth from some of the most unlikely sources. *Things are not always as they seem*, as Shakespeare would be among the first to affirm.

One time, just a few years ago in a continuing education class in one of New York's community colleges, a popular visiting professor was teaching a course on major themes in Shakespeare's plays. At one point in the lecture on his truth of drama and of life, that things are often not as they first appear to be, he asked his class of older adults, "Who comes to mind as you think of those who seem to be transformed from one persona to another, surprising us by their ability to be something other than the self-absorbed figure we had assumed them to be?" No one volunteered a response. Then an older woman, bent over in a wheelchair, toward the back on the aisle, lifted her hand firmly, whispering a name. "Cordelia," she said. "Say again," called the professor, realizing what a gift to the class she was, and how accurate was her whispered answer. "Cordelia," she repeated, this time with more strength. "Yes, yes," said the teacher. "Lear's daughter who says she will never return is the only one who does return to be with her father in his closing days. The other two, who promised loyalty, have gone their own self-absorbed way. The one we least expect plays the heroine in the end. Things are not always as they first appear to us.

God in Christ, in similar fashion, often brings forward the least likely ones, including you and me, to play leading roles, to speak truth to power, to lead the weak toward acts of strength and courage. God in Christ seems to love to call a Zachaeus out of a sycamore tree in order that the two of them might have a transforming conversation; or to call to discipleship an ambivalent Simon Peter when all others have written him off as an untruthful coward. Yet, Jesus decides to use him to build up the young church. Things are often not as they seem: The one with the most reason to be resentful becomes the one who shows the way for others to be generous. Things are not always as they seem.

III

Finally, let us just say briefly that Saul's conversion improves his relationship with God in Christ, not by making him more independent and self-reliant but by doing just the opposite. Paul learns to become more *dependent* on God and the Christian community. He is made dependent, as if he were a child who can admit that there is much he does not know. "The one who knows so much must become the one who knows nothing, one who must be led by the hand, healed, and instructed by the very ones he once despised." writes Dr. Willimon. "In this painful, baffling interim," says Willimon, "we turn and become as a little child. We progress by regression and go forward by falling backward." Instead of becoming more independent and isolated, we

move toward becoming more dependent on the whole community of faith.

What had been considered a threat to our moving forward is discovered to be no longer our enemy but our friend and teacher. The enemy has been converted into a brother in order that we might, together, pursue God's purpose. Some of the least likely ones are chosen to be our companions and, in time, our leaders. They have been called by God and it is God's cause and God's vision that they are leading us to pursue. Together, we provide mutual support: we are called the church, the body of Christ, and it takes all kinds – the likely ones and the most unlikely ones – to make it a reality.

Thanks be to God.