

## More Than a Moment

sermon digest

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Acts 9:1-20  
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This morning as we travel with Paul down the road to Damascus, many of us may experience something more than just a little bit of discomfort. The high drama we encounter in Luke's rendition of Paul's "Damascus Road experience" can leave us more than a little perplexed. Like me, it may remind you of sermons you heard in childhood that raised the troubling question, "Are you *sure* you are saved?" Or it may drum up for you unpleasant encounters where you felt compelled to defend the legitimacy of your religious faith.

I cannot help but identify with Pastor Heidi Peterson's discomfort as she relates a Saturday morning encounter with a fellow Habitat for Humanity volunteer. "Are you saved?" the man asked her. When she assured him that she was, he wanted to know the date, time and description of her conversion experience. He was more than a little dissatisfied when she acknowledged to him that she could not pinpoint a single date. Having been baptized as an infant, she had been richly nurtured in the Christian faith and had grown everyday of her life into the faith commitment that still guided and sustained her life. "If you consider a flower unfolding petal by petal over days, how can you mark the precise moment at which the bud 'converts' to being a flower?" she asked. She acknowledges that she doubted neither the man's religious experience nor his claim that since the moment of his own conversion, his life has been infused with meaning. "It was his easy dismissal of a conversion of a different sort," she recalls, "that bothered me" [*Christian Century*, April 11, 2001].

I recall a similar experience as a young girl when a pastor called me and another girl out of our pews for prayer at the front of the church during the commitment time at the close of the service. Dorothy responded appropriately with tears. I responded with some confusion. All of a sudden, I felt out of place in this place where I had felt loved and nurtured. All of a sudden, I felt excluded from a people that had lovingly embraced me; and despite other occasions when I sought to come forward and tried to do what they seemed to be wanting me to do, my profession of faith did not seem to be acceptable. It did not become valid until I showed the proper emotion. That little church and those good people gave me over my years of growing up some of the best, most important gifts of my life; but in looking back, I question the necessity of their (lovingly) making me feel like an outsider before they could welcome me as an insider. That experience and similar experiences in growing up strongly shaped my own view of how we welcome children into the Christian faith.

I recall, too, the day Larry opened the front door of our house in Louisville to our neighbor from across the street. The man's pastor was visiting with him, and he was taking him door-to-door in the community introducing him to his neighbors. He particularly wanted to introduce him to his neighbor who was a pastor and may have been as surprised as Larry was when his pastor inquired of Larry, "Tell me. Are you saved?"

My and Larry's experience in becoming a Christian "pass muster." Because of the faith tradition in which we each grew up, we can point to specific instances in which we decided to accept Christ. Over the years, however, I have looked around and observed the rich faith of others who did not follow that same path. They cannot point to a single moment in time when they were "converted", when they made a specific decision to follow Christ. Like the flower Peterson describes, they made multiple decisions, their flower of faith opening one petal at a time. I don't doubt the adequacy of their faith experience because I do not doubt the God of loving grace that I know in Jesus Christ, the God, who like the loving father, runs to meet us on the way. Although it is important in our maturing process to make our faith our own rather than something that is just handed down from our parents or church, I share the frustration of those who feel they are put on the defensive and must prove the adequacy of their faith experience to those who acknowledge one and only one pathway to God.

**The routes by which we come to Christ vary because we each come by way of our own life experience.** If we look closely, the story of Paul's conversion opens the way for a more accepting approach to others. Paul's "Damascus Road experience", often held up as the model to which our own experience must conform, is anything but a model for conformity in the book of Acts. Although Paul's conversion is undoubtedly the most dramatic, it falls within a series of dramatic conversion experiences. Luke begins recounting the story of Paul at the stoning of Stephen. Saul, the Semitic

version of the Latin name of Paul, stood by approvingly as the crowd killed Stephen. A “young man”, he rendered the mob service in their action, standing watch over their coats as they went about their cruel act. He went on from there, Luke notes, with gusto, “ravaging the church . . . entering house after house; dragging . . . men and women . . . to prison” (Acts 7:58; 8:1, 2-3). As is often the case with persecution, however, the little band of believers flourished and grew. Fleeing Jerusalem, they took word of Jesus wherever they went, eventually forcing Paul himself to set his foot on the Damascus Road to bring them to justice.

Notice, however, that Paul’s story is interrupted. His own momentous conversion experience is sandwiched between the surprising conversion of the Samaritans and Egyptian eunuch and the conversions of none other than Simon Peter and the Roman centurion, Cornelius. Each experience is different, shaped by the life situation of the individuals. The stories’ one point of consistency is the welcoming grace of the God who is encountered in Christ.

Notice, too, that Luke’s description of Paul’s conversion in chapter 9 speaks to not one, but two conversions. Ananias, a disciple situated in Damascus, also experiences a vision. Unlike Paul, who responds to the one who comes to him on the Damascus road with the question, “Who are you?” Ananias recognizes the one who calls his name and responds, “Here I am, Lord.” Unlike Paul, who is struck both blind and speechless, Ananias converses with the one who comes to him. Receiving instructions to go to the impaired and waiting Paul, he argues: “Lord, I have heard about the evil this man has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and he is here in Damascus with authority to carry us all away to prison.” And in an oft repeated biblical fashion, the Lord responds with a commissioning: “Go.” Ananias went and arriving at the house where Paul was, embraced his dread enemy as “Brother”. His sight restored, Paul was baptized and remaining with the disciples in Damascus, began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues.

**If we follow the Way of Jesus, we will undergo many experiences of conversion.** Paul, it is true, would again encounter suspicion as he sought to find his way in the church. As was the case with Ananias and the church in Damascus, so it would be the case with Barnabas and the church in Jerusalem. Conversion, you see, is not an end in itself. We seldom come to know Christ in isolation, and we do not grow in Christ in isolation from others. Welcomed into the community of a loving, nurturing Body of Christ, we grow into maturity.

Too easily, we in the church form our ironclad rules about who is and who is not an appropriate fellow traveler. Too often, we draw up our qualifications for those who may and those who may not sit alongside of us at Christ’s Table. And repeatedly, not once, not twice, but repeatedly our strict barriers are blown to pieces before the wide welcome of the one in whose name we serve. Ananias and Barnabas were called to look beyond their reasonable fear of one who had been the arch enemy of Christ’s budding church. Peter would be called beyond safe, seemingly reasonable geographic, ethnic boundaries to step into the livingroom of an inquiring Cornelius and embrace him as a brother. Following in Peter’s footsteps, the course of the church would expand, as Luke puts it, from Jerusalem to “all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Followers of “the Way”, the earliest designation of those who followed Jesus, must be prepared for many surprises along that way. They should be prepared for not just one, but many, many experiences of conversion. We never, William Willimon observes

become too old, too adept at living the Christian life to be exempt from the need for more conversion, [one more] additional turning. The Christian life is akin to the way in which Luke organizes the life of Paul—a series of journeys, pilgrimages, excursions out into some unexplored territory where all that is known is the faithfulness of God. Conversion is a process more than a moment”

—*Interpretation: Acts*, 103.

“We are an imperfect people in an imperfect world,” we firmly acknowledge in our Grace Covenant. “We have come together, not in absolute knowledge or possession of truth, but as pilgrims assisting one another in the journey toward the promise of God.” We are on a journey toward truth, but we do not possess all truth. Our journey alongside one another, our encounter of new people, new situations, new needs in our world challenge us now and always toward change and growth.

Very early in our time together, we came across a phrase that we have seen as speaking to a

central aspect of our identity as a people of God. We are “an unfinished people of faith.” We are a people of faith—oh, yes. But the very vastness of the God whom we worship in Christ and the wideness of the world in which God has placed us and to which God calls us means that we are now and we are always a people on the Way, who have not yet arrived.

If we would follow Jesus in the Way, we can expect surprising revelations along the way. Conversion, then you see, is not just a fleeting moment. It is a way of life.