

“Converting the Converted” (15Apr18)
Acts 9:1-19a

It’s the prototypical conversion story: the blinding flash of light, a disembodied voice, the knock-your-socks-off shock of it, getting up, dusting off, and finding life entirely changed.

You may know somebody who talks about having such a template of conversion. There’s perhaps a chance some of you have a personal story that fits this form.

But this is no mandatory pattern. There is constantly conversion without these phenomenal details. That’s important at the outset, because our faith can be too frequently defined by subjective experience, and in a way that excludes those without it and actually excludes a focus on God. If *you* haven’t felt the warm presence of the Holy Spirit. If *you* haven’t accepted Jesus into *your* heart. If *you* haven’t given *yourself* over to a higher power. If *you* haven’t clearly heard God speaking to *you*. If *you* haven’t wept about *your* sins and prayed formulaic words. If *you* haven’t gone forward for an altar call. And for that, God bless Billy Graham, but good riddance to him. He may have been the most definitive of the past century in categorizing insiders and outsiders, with the only way to get to *be* an insider involving an eternally-weighted decision.

Against that mold, we should notice in today’s reading there isn’t just that single standard conversion experience, but two. This is always referred to as “The Conversion of Paul” but is just as much the re-conversion of Ananias.

Paul may get the banner attention for a couple reasons. It may be that his seems more supernatural, with the beam of light and the voice only he could hear and getting knocked down in the middle of the highway, blind to the world around him. We like the mystical details.

It could also be that his conversion seems more substantial. Again, this is the archetypal 180° turnaround, going from the worst bad guy to become the best, the nastiest and most violent persecutor of the faith to the one who will contribute more to its spread and its theology than

anybody else in the history of Christianity. It makes for such a good story.

But I also have to voice reluctance about favoring Paul’s episode. The first reason is that, because it is so extraordinary, it is also extremely rare. Quite likely none of us would have anything in store to make feasible such a remarkable reversal, a worst-to-first sort of sweep. As the epitome of experience, however, it would be better to see our smaller stories reflected in his, rather than dismissed as insignificant.

The other hesitancy involves how our culture has ruled out the possibility of conversion, has eliminated the opportunity, limits all future possibility. For how fast so much is changing at this point in history, we seem to have arrived at a time where people are the one thing that can’t change.

It strikes me first in how we treat those who wind up with a criminal record. It becomes a permanent stain, where somebody is practically unable to find employment because of a felony conviction. Or to move into a neighborhood for being seen irredeemably as a sexual deviant. We’ve lost the concept of reform, or restorative justice, or rehabilitation as a purpose of prison, no longer even a possibility of paying a debt to society, since it is a perpetual state of indebtedness, a lifelong confinement, whether they are sentenced to be stuck behind bars or face the relentlessly punishing confinements of life alongside a society that won’t allow a place for them. “Criminal” remains such a defining label that it too often completely takes over an identity and any other characteristic or potential.

(A side note: trying to overcome such restricted livelihood is why Just Bakery is here next week. Please remember that and support them.)

There may be some grounds to argue, but it strikes me that our therapeutic practices also impose similar restrictions with practically no way out of the liabilities to identity. One can only be a recovering alcoholic, never formerly an alcoholic. It’s always “My name is Bill and I’m an alcoholic” and never again simply “My name

is Bill.” Or a recovering Catholic, in the jokiness that gets used sometimes. The damage is left as permanent.

But I don’t think Paul would’ve referred to himself by saying “I’m Paul and I’m a recovering persecutor.” That is too stuck in the old, defined by the former identity. Paul’s language, rather, was “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” When Paul tells this story in his letters about how he used to be hateful, it isn’t because that negativity still has a hold on him or because he’s still trying to crawl out from under those pressures, but precisely to indicate that he’s living in a radical and remarkable newness where something so awful can no longer define him in the least, a grace and forgiveness that looks past that entirely, where it exists only as the indicator of what he is now...

much like the nail holes in Jesus’ hands and scars that Thomas reached out to touch last week. Those were no longer injuries for Jesus, but more like trophies of what had been conquered, overcome, what used to hurt him but had been taken over by life. In a way that we much too often refuse to allow for ourselves or those around us, Paul’s conversion means he’s been taken over by a new beginning of life.

I so much today want *you* to hear that, to have that, to know that voice of Jesus calling and beckoning you to eliminate and forget your negative labels and realize a new beginning, a fresh start, a clean bill of life.

So even while expecting that a grand total of few to none of us would be the type to declare that our lives were a mess before Christ and now everything is hunky-dory, coming up roses, picture perfect—given that we live in a hard and complicated real world and none of us is perfect and we do still struggle, I want you to find yourself in Paul’s conversion.

That is, after all, what happens as we declare again and again that commission from Jesus for the forgiveness of all your sins. It’s as we continue this season of Easter and the promise not only of a resurrected but a resurrecting Lord, as he comes to meet you and offer himself, his life for

you, in the meal of this table each week. It’s with the assurance in Paul’s own words that, having been baptized into a death like Jesus, you will be united to walk in newness of life with him.

That is conversion, a Damascus road experience, even though I expect there’s plenty where it doesn’t seem remarkable, where life doesn’t seem spectacularly new, doesn’t feel stunningly right, where we don’t leap for joy but end up plodding ahead. See, being a Christian doesn’t suddenly make everything just right and isn’t a rapid U-turn on life’s problems.

After all, though this happened suddenly for Paul, it certainly didn’t magically make everything better; rather he lost his prominence and self-assurance and put his life at risk and was arrested and eventually killed for this conversion experience, for listening to Jesus. Even before the end of this chapter there will be threats against his life. This isn’t a piece of cake with everything going swimmingly.

Another interesting detail in this story: once Paul heard that Jesus was calling him, he never says another word this whole passage. This from the guy who, as we said, becomes the most important voice ever in Christianity (aside from Jesus himself). Not one more word in this entire passage. He’s simply converted.

That makes the second conversion somehow more impressive as the harder one. That’s for Ananias. Now, he’s a small character. Out of the whole Bible and entire history of Christianity, this is the only place he appears, the vital but small role he has, to enable the most definitive Christian. That’s important for us insignificant folks. We may further relate to this little everyday Christian, who, as Jesus calls out to *him*, has to argue back. He resists. He makes it into a dialogue, a debate, with deliberation. He says he doesn’t think it’s a good idea to forgive Paul or to involve him in this work. He wants to keep this dangerous guy safely at arm’s length. Ananias straight up labels Paul as an evildoer and says he has no interest in following Jesus’ instructions. But he, too, is converted. He goes and speaks the good news from Jesus to Paul.

And if most of us have not felt the glorious but simple vision of Paul's conversion, I expect we may have lots of experience with this Ananias conversion, with the arguments and deliberations and doubts, with not really wanting to do what Jesus wants of us, of taking a while to figure it out and be motivated and believe what we need to.

In all, there are both sides of this sharing new life in Christ, of being Easter people. Like Paul, we have hard change in not staying with our former ways, giving them up. Like Ananias, we face hard change in allowing new people in and adapting. There's the difficulty of really allowing forgiveness to sink in, that your wrongs are not held against you, and there's that really unpleasant task of being the one to offer and practice giving forgiveness. There's hearing Jesus for the first time when maybe your life had been tuned to a very different signal, and there's trying not to drown out his voice, to let it blend in as static, but instead continuing to have your life clearly and definitively shaped by his calling.

One relief or positive note in this story, amid those difficulties of conversion, is that Jesus wins the argument. Whether suddenly in a flash, or slowly through deliberation and reasoning. And not only that he wins, but that his purpose does, his purpose of sharing life, and spreading it.

So as you come here week after week to be converted yet again and raised to new life in Jesus once more and called to his purpose over and over, it is so that you may know the abundance of his life, for you and for all this world.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.