

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
New Member Sunday
Sunday, October 16, 2022
10am

Text: Acts 9:1-31 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

In last week's sermon I alluded to the conversion of Paul – the man previously known as Saul.

In today's Scripture lesson we heard the details of that conversion. A pastor remarked that the story of Saul's conversion can give us a "faith inferiority complex."¹ That phrase struck a chord with me. For several years in my adolescence, I was convinced that my relationship with Jesus was not real or good enough because I had not had a 'Damascus Road experience' like Saul. I was born into a Christian family, baptized as an infant, raised in the Church – there has never been a time I did not identify as a Christian. But I wondered: Am I really a Christian without a dramatic conversion story to prove it?

The Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor said this of Saul's encounter with Jesus: "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of *that* one was to knock him off his horse."²

Of course, Saul was not riding a horse, but we grasp her point. Saul's conversion story is the exception, not the norm. Saul was in Damascus with a warrant to arrest and extradite Jewish followers of Jesus back to Jerusalem to stand religious trial for heresy. The drama of the zealous persecution he was pursuing had to be matched by an equally dramatic conversion. As an observant Jew, Saul grew up hearing stories of divine encounters: a burning bush, a pillar of cloud and fire, an angel in disguise. So, when the glory of the ascended Jesus blinded Saul on that desert road, and Jesus' voice issued forth from the heavens, Saul had no choice

¹ Joseph S. Harvard, "Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 402.

² Quoted by William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988), 73.

but to pay attention. The Jesus that Saul thought was dead was now speaking to him in a language Saul could not ignore: the language of theophany.

As an adolescent, I longed for a theophany in my own life – an encounter with Jesus that was as clear cut and obvious as Saul’s. It took me many years to accept that God makes Godself known to us in all kinds of ways. Scholar William Muehl said, “The roads of Christian faith are as varied as the people who profess it.”³ There is no one right way to come to faith in Jesus. Each of us is made uniquely in the image of God, and so it also stands to reason that our faith stories are unique, too. Our theophanies – our divine encounters – the ways we experience God – vary from person to person.

Authentic Christianity does not always look like dramatic conversion experiences leading to dramatic changes in behavior. We are converted to the Way of Jesus as we gradually grow in Christian maturity. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews (5:12), we graduate from spiritual milk to the bread of heaven. John Wesley called this process “going on to perfection.” And this process of growing in our faith, *maturing* in our faith, is fostered by a nurturing community of fellow believers.

We help others discover their gifts.

We use our gifts to help protect and propel the gifts of others.

We grow our gifts together to grow the Church.

This is the part of Saul’s conversion story that I want us to pay attention to: Saul may have been the only person who saw the glory of Jesus that day, but he was not the only person changed by his encounter. It took a community to complete Saul’s conversion. It took a community to raise him up into the great evangelist he would become.

After Saul hears the voice of Jesus addressing him, and beholds the beatific vision, Saul’s posse leads him, blind and shaken, into Damascus. For three days they watch him grow increasingly disoriented, refusing both food and drink. They, too, heard the voice that Saul heard; they know something significant has happened. But they do not know how to help this once proud and ambitious man. Instead, help comes from the very community Saul has been persecuting.

³ William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 17.

The ascended Jesus dispatches a disciple named Ananias to the home where Saul is staying. Ananias knows Saul's dangerous reputation. He is concerned for his safety and the safety of the church in Damascus. But he has also heard the Lord's prophecy for Saul: This man will be an apostle to the nations, God's instrument to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike. And so, despite his misgivings, Ananias obeys the Lord and seeks out Saul. He enters the house. And there he does something remarkable. He lays his hands upon Saul, and he calls Saul "Brother."

Now, the laying on of hands and the familial language are both significant. Laying on of hands is a gesture of blessing and healing. It also signifies commissioning. When someone is commissioned for ministry, traditionally they are commissioned with a laying on of hands. The term "Brother" is a term of kinship. It signifies a familial relationship. So, in the laying on of hands and calling Saul his brother, Ananias does more than just heal Saul of his blindness. Ananias claims Saul as his kin and commissions him for ministry as an apostle to the nations. He declares that Saul, once a persecutor of Christians, is now a member of Christ's family in covenant relationship with all of Jesus' followers. Ananias' words and gesture signify the *community's* confirmation of Saul's call from God and the gifts that God has given him to fulfill that call.

In the church, our language of calling is frequently limited to the office of pastor. We speak of a pastor being *called* to the *vocation of ministry*. But that is an impoverished understanding of calling that robs the Church of the diversity of vocations that make up the body of Christ. Every single one of you is called. Every single one of you is called to use your gifts to build up the church and the kingdom of God. Conversion is not the end of our faith journey; it is a *means* to an end, the launching point for the calling and mission that God has given each one of us as followers of Jesus.

After Ananias confirms Saul's calling, he is baptized and begins his ministry. But the work of the community continues. Before Saul could begin preaching, he needed to be taught the Way of Jesus. Disciples make disciples; this is the way of discipleship. It is assumed that the disciples Saul stayed with in Damascus mentored him in sharing the Gospel. And when Saul's preaching began to upset the Jewish religious authorities, and they plotted to kill him, it was these same disciples who preserved his life by lowering him in a basket through the city wall

so that he could escape. Our Scripture lesson then tells us that Saul journeyed on to Jerusalem, where his fellow believers, like Ananias, received him with fear and skepticism. But he found an ally in Barnabas, who advocated him before the church leadership until they, too, confirmed Saul's calling. Along every step of Saul's journey, he is accompanied by a community of fellow believers who help him nurture his gifts. Together they use their combined gifts to build up the church and "living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers" (v. 31).

Today we formally receive new people into our fellowship of faith here at Community UMC. Each of these individuals has been called by God: called to share their particular gifts, and to grow those gifts, in covenant community with us. They bring gifts for music, for audio-visual work, for preaching and teaching and visitation and ministry with children. Above all, they bring the gift of faithfulness. Today they are publicly reaffirming their faith in Jesus and committing to love and support this congregation with their prayers, presence, gifts, witness, and service.

This act of commitment fills me with such wonder, church! So often I hear people say, "My faith is my business and no one else's." Perhaps those words are an attempt to deflect being held accountable for the things they believe. Or perhaps they are an attempt to protect their faith from people who would seek to change it. I respect the boundary those words set, but as a pastor, they also make me sad. Because if we call ourselves Christian, our faith cannot be a private affair. If we think it is, then we have confused it with something else. Our faith does not exist solely for our own edification, our own comfort, our own salvation. True Christian faith is a *community* affair. Whatever form it takes, it exists for sharing the Gospel and building up the kingdom of God. And building the kingdom of God is demanding work. Christian discipleship is too demanding to be an individual endeavor. Only as part of a caring community can we find the resources and relationships that forge an enduring faith.

So, in a culture that cherishes the individual above all else, committing ourselves to grow our faith in community with others is a countercultural act. And in response to that act, we, as the body of Christ gathered here at Community UMC, make our own commitment to the individuals we receive today.

- Like Ananias, we extend the hand of blessing toward them and claim them as our own. We acknowledge their calling and gifting by God, and we commission them to do ministry alongside us.
- Like the disciples in Damascus, we commit to helping them grow their gifts to build up the church and the kingdom of God.
- Like the believers who helped Saul escape when his life was in danger, we promise to pray for them, to help bear their burdens, to keep the faith for them when they cannot keep it themselves.
- And like Barnabas, we promise to encourage and advocate for them as fellow siblings in Christ.

Today we acknowledge and celebrate the ways that God is growing our gifts together to grow this church. And together we claim once more the calling that we are gifted for more, gifted to build up the church and the kingdom of God.

[transition to liturgy for welcoming new members]