

April 18, 2010
United Church of Northfield
Acts 9: 1-20

Conversion!
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Introduction

In 1974, between terms from my studies at Cambridge University in Cambridge, England, I **traveled** from England to Rome and back during the 3 week vacation in March between winter and spring terms. After staying at the home of a minister in Geneva, Switzerland, and armed with a Swiss train pass, I boarded a train for the city of Berne, Switzerland. It was late in the day, and a journey of several hours. I settled back to enjoy the beautiful Swiss scenery, and got out my trusty map to see where I was going. After a while, perhaps an hour into the journey, the towns that we were passing did not match the towns on the train route to Berne. Oh, Oh, I thought. What's going on here? Beginning to get worried, I asked some passengers I found out that my train was not going to Berne. It was going somewhere else. Somewhere else might be ok, but it was getting late, and I did not want to arrive in a strange place in the dark and late at night, so I made a sudden decision. Quickly, as we approached the next station, I shouldered my backpack, and got off the train. I had landed in a little village, and it was not far to walk to the center of town. The first hotel beyond my budget, but a short walk led to a Bed and Breakfast that was comfortable and in my student price range. –p- The next morning, I made a new travel plan and was on my way.

Transition to Paul and Acts 9 Text

This little travel story has several elements that are in common with our scripture text and Acts chapter 9. It was dark when I discovered that I was going in the wrong direction at night. Other passengers were able to help me correct my journey. My awareness that I was traveling in the wrong direction came only slowly. Finally, I was able to get back on

track in my journey the next day in the daylight.

What has happened that caused me to end up in the wrong place? On European trains traveling long distances, the trains are divided into sections, and different cars go to different final destinations. These destinations are marked clearly on the side of the train cars, so you can read them in the train station. I knew all this, but had not paid attention when I boarded the train.

Scripture Connection

While this travel story is not one of personal conversion, I have shared it because it has all the steps in the Apostle Paul's famous Damascus road conversion. These are steps or stages which commonly turn up in the experiences of spiritual transformation.

Let's now look at Paul's journey and see if we can discover the similarities. Paul, a dedicated Pharisee, was chasing after Christians who might have fled the fold in Jerusalem and gone to Damascus. Paul was clear about his role in life and the direction it was taking. He knew where he was going. But God had a different idea. Suddenly, there was light and a voice from Heaven spoke to Paul and he was struck blind. His companions helped him get to Damascus, and there for 3 days, Paul waited blind, in darkness. God's servant Ananias, was sent to Paul, and Ananias heals his blindness. Then after a radical change of heart, Paul joins the disciples. Paul has moved from darkness to light and changed the entire purpose of his life. I imagine the disciples give him a short course in Jesus' teachings, and then Paul sets out on his famous missionary journeys.

Spiritual Transformation

Very often during the faith journeys of individuals, there are experiences of darkness which deepen that person's faith. These "dark periods" go by many different names. Some are called the "dark night of the soul." My teacher of faith development at Andover Newton Theological School claimed that a person could not really reach a great

depth of faith until they had a mid-life crisis. (A mid-life crisis does not have to happen at age 50, it could be anytime.)

The Lenten Study Series, *Wrestling With Angels*, has shown us a number of people who experienced dark times, only to find their faith deepened when they came out of a tunnel of despair. In that video program, lay people share stories of battling cancer, or suffering the loss of one loved one after another. They complain, “Why me?” But later the people in the program admit that through these challenging experiences, their faith had grown much deeper. Philip Yancey, the author of the book, *What’s So Amazing about Grace*, provides some useful perspective. He points out that often, after a person has come out of the darkness – has gotten beyond the dark problem, into the light, that they can find a significant meaning for their “dark night of the soul.”

Tom Smith’s Belief Survey

Now many people may go through life without a mid-life crisis. Many people may not have the dramatic voice from Heaven experience of St. Paul. What about those folks? I think it would be helpful to share with you the research of Tom Smith of the *National Opinion Research Center* at University of Chicago. He has published a study of people who have had a personal spiritual transformation. He found that only half the people who had a life-changing religious experience had a “born again” experience. He found that the other half of the people did not have a born again life changing experience. What caused this spiritual transformation? Smith’s discovery will not surprise you. In fact, what he found ties in very well with what we have mentioned earlier about “dark” life experiences. Let me quote from his report:

“Preliminary analysis of the open-ended reports of spiritual/religious changes indicates that two factors most frequently triggered change: 1) religious participation, but not usually explicit searching for greater truth or new insight and 2) having had a personal problem, most

frequently an illness, accident, or death involving oneself or a loved one.”

So, the two things we mentioned before are the biggest factors: religious participation – St. Paul was very high on the “religious participation” scale – and a personal issue, such as the death or illness of a loved one – the kinds of issues the lay persons in the video study reported.

The other discovery Smith made confirms the idea that God may touch our life at any time, no matter who we are in life. He found that the people who had life-changing spiritual experiences came from all walks of life and spanned the entire age range. He found that there was no difference between those who had special spiritual experiences and those who did not – at least in terms of age and station in life.

These critical insights lead us to look at the second half of our story in Acts. This is the story of Ananias and his critical involvement with the Apostle Paul.

Ananias

Remember the story. Ananias was a committed Christian living in Damascus. God sent him to Paul to heal him of his blindness and bring him into the fold of the disciples. Ananias went to Paul reluctantly, and with great courage because of Paul’s terrible reputation among the Christians. He went, trusting God’s instructions. This story has powerful implications for our lives and for our ministry as Christians.

First, this story tells us that sometimes God sends the person or persons we need into our lives, and we do not really seek them out! Sometimes they come because they know they are sent. But often, I believe, they are there sitting next to us in the doctors office waiting room, or across the table at coffee hour, or on a journey with us in Bible study discussion. They discover the darkness that needs the light of God, and they respond. Then, God is at work and spiritual transformation begins.

Secondly, there is another insight here, which is almost the same thing that I just said. Remember Smith said that having a religious affiliation was one of the two reasons people experienced deep spiritual change. This is the power and wonder of the church at work! We do not grow spiritually in a vacuum! We need partners on our faith journey. In so many ways that we do not know, Ananias was Paul's partner in Paul's faith journey. Ananias' great spiritual transformation was to become a companion, a healer, and a teacher for the one who would become a greater teacher of the Christian faith.

God Acts in Unexpected Ways

The third powerful insight we can discover from this entire story is that God acts in unexpected and powerful ways. Paul is certainly an extreme example of a person who was highly educated in the Jewish faith of his day. He was firmly and strongly convinced that he had all the answers and was very clear about his call to serve God. He would never have thought that he needed a change of faith, a change of heart, and a change in the direction of his ministry! But God knew that he needed that change. And God's hand was powerfully active in making that change happen. So, amazing is this story, that Luke, the writer of Acts, tells Paul's conversion story 3 times in Acts!

Yes, God is a surprising God, a god of grace and the unexpected!

Millard Fuller as an Example

Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, is a good example of someone whose life crisis changed and transformed the direction of his life. With the ultimate founding of Habitat for Humanity, Fuller's transformation changed the lives of millions of people, just as St. Paul's transformation changed the lives of millions of people.

Fuller was a millionaire at age 29. But his focus on wealth and making money created a crisis in his health and in his marriage. When Fuller woke up to this situation, and

decided to make some changes, he and his wife gave their money to the poor and moved to Kononia Farm. Kononia Farm was an activist Christian community, and I believe it was living in that faith community that helped inspire and motivate Fuller to found Habitat for Humanity. Once again, the spiritual transformation process was at work. The darkness of personal crisis was changed to the light of a new godly purpose. Fuller's life moved in an entirely new direction. Yet, I believe, it was many Christian partners who made it possible for Fuller's vision to be a success. Even today, Habitat for Humanity housing is built by many volunteer hands and helpers. Yes, God changes the world, one person at a time!

Conclusion

Your faith journey may be very different from St. Paul's. Your faith journey may be different from Millard Fullers. You may not necessarily experience some life changing event. Your spiritual growth may be a gradual sort of process. There are several possibilities for you on your faith journey. You may discover that you can stay on the same course you are already on. You might, however, discover that your life needs to make a course correction. Or, like St. Paul, you may need to go in a significantly different direction.

As you continue your faith journey in this faith community, The United Church of Northfield, be prepared to become another Ananias. For God may call you to be the agent of spiritual change with another person. And that person may be sitting right here in this room!

It may be also, that a time comes and you are journeying in the "dark night of the soul," and need a spiritual companion to lead you out of the darkness and into the light. Then you may discover that God is sending someone to be your partner in faith, someone to companion you on the journey.

Thanks be to God for sending Jesus and his present day disciples to lead us from darkness to light! Amen!