

Last Sunday, we heard that the resurrected Jesus went in search of his disciples, Thomas among the rest. In other words, Jesus, the victim of the disciples' betrayal, abandonment and denial, sought out his former friends—not to berate them for their disloyalty, but to assure them first, of his life, and then of his love, his abiding love for them, his forgiveness and desire for on-going friendship and commitment. Suella characterized this as a new “creation story”, when Jesus “breathed” on his disciples the Holy Spirit.

That story, in John's Gospel, is partially replicated in our Acts story today—at least in the sense of the resurrected Jesus seeking out a man who had not been faithful to him. The story is more dramatic than last Sunday's and the plot twist really quite remarkable.

Unlike Jesus' disciples, Saul is an elite in Jewish society; both educated and pious, he is zealous for his convictions and way of life. He is deeply offended by the faction (sect) of Jesus, which seems to him both blasphemous and subversive; he is determined to eradicate those who follow it. And then—he is confronted by the resurrected Jesus himself.

The story is so familiar to many of us already and we've just heard it read again this morning. Does this story seem astonishing to you? What catches you in this story of Saul's radical change? (*Interact...*)

So, what happened to Saul? What changed him so radically? Perhaps this is our question. And more intriguing—does this happen to others? And could it happen to me?

Willie James Jennings, a commentator on Acts, wants us to understand that Saul at the beginning of this story is a killer. Zeal and violence are joined in Saul—and authority, from the religious leaders. Jennings describes Saul as a “closed circle”: he has the Truth, he's passionate about it, and he has support of the authorities; these things reinforce each other within him. That means he's a dangerous man to other Jews who aren't loyal to traditional Judaism, like early Jewish Christians, believers and followers of Jesus.

In our story Saul, with others, is on his way to the city of Damascus, pursuing followers of Jesus—not realizing that he himself is being pursued. At about midday, a blinding light knocks Saul to the ground and a voice addresses him, “Saul, Saul, why are you hurting me?”

Saul responds, “Who are you, *Adonai* (Lord, the substitute name for God)?”
“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting...”

Perhaps we can say that with this exchange, the “closed circle” that was Saul is broken open. Saul’s certitude and zeal is shattered when the one he calls “Lord” (God) is identified with the crucified Jesus, whom he hates, but who now addresses him with tenderness, “Why are you hurting me?”

We don’t know how momentary Saul’s conversion was. Maybe it happened in that moment, or maybe in the next three days of blindness as he recalled the blazing light on the road at noon and the poignant voice of Jesus, or in the gentle conversation with a stranger who came to him and called him “brother” and baptized him. What seems evident is that what the NT calls “repentance” (*metanoia*—change of heart and life) happened to Saul in those few days, as he surrendered his self-concept, his identity, as a righteous hunter and killer of heretics... to become a follower of Jesus himself.

It’s almost unbelievable to those around Saul. What he asks them—and us—to take seriously is his startling experience of being confronted by a personage he thought was an imposter and dead. This man, Jesus, turns out not only to be alive but to have sought him out and addressed him personally and movingly as the voice of God. This single experience largely disrupts Saul’s whole calling and purpose in life—and he surrenders to it.

If Saul’s conversion is in some sense a model of what Biblical conversion is, we will do well not to focus on the drama of it all—the blinding light, the audible voice, the suddenness of the encounter. Rather we will want to consider how Saul as a “closed circle” is broken open by the loving meeting with Jesus. Some speak of “de-centering the self” or “loosening the ego-knot” as the way our closed-circle selves are broken open. In the case of Saul, that may have begun to happen long before his encounter on the Damascus road. Perhaps his witnessing

the martyrdom of Stephen created a crack in his defended self. He claims to have been “passionately loyal to God” (Acts 22:3) from an early age, and that devotion in itself may have been a wedge in his journey to surrendering himself to Jesus.

What are your experiences, what are my experiences, of being changed, of being converted away from a preoccupation with being in control, or wielding power, or being right, being recognized, being secure and invulnerable? Of course these are all basic human needs that have a legitimate place in our development of self and integrity. But when they become attachments that close us off from others, from God, and even from parts of ourselves, we become “closed circles” and perhaps like Saul, God begins to pursue us.

Last year when the men’s group read the book by bell hooks, The Will to Change, I felt anew God’s pursuit of me and the invitation to conversion, to be changed. In a chapter called *Healing Male Spirit*, bell hooks writes:

Men cannot speak their pain in patriarchal culture. Boys learn this early in childhood. As a girl, I was awed by a man in my church, a deacon, who would stand before the congregation and speak his love for the divine spirit. Often in the midst of his testimony he would begin to weep, sobbing tears into a big white handkerchief. The girls and boys who witnessed his tears were embarrassed for him, for in their eyes he was showing himself to be weak. When he wept, the men who stood beside him turned their eyes away. They were ashamed to see a man express intense feeling. (p. 135)

Reading this wasn’t a blinding light or an audible voice that knocked me over, like Saul. It was (is) a tender invitation to know, affirm, and share how I—a man—feel: pain, especially from childhood, and the yearning to be loved and to love. I too am a closed circle being broken open, my defended self, de-centered—especially by the awareness that I am deeply loved just as I am.

How does conversion happen? Clearly not by our own engineering. Saul was not in control of his circumstances, and neither are we. In the events of our lives, the relationships, the conflicts, the diminishments, the joys, the griefs, God pursues us, and God comes to us.

We wait, we watch, and we pray: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new spirit deep within me.” (Ps. 51:10); “Take, Lord, receive: all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my entire will. You have given all that I have, all that I am; now I surrender it to You. Grant me only your love and your grace; that’s enough for me.” (Suscipe, Ignatius)

For reflection/conversation:

- Right after Saul’s conversion, he began preaching about Jesus; the people are “amazed”/”baffled”. Does that seem amazing to you?
- Do you know anyone who experienced such a radical change of focus and direction in their life?
- Can you identify “conversion” in your life? Was it sudden? prolonged?
- Should we pray for radical change in others?
- Does it matter if we talk of “call” rather than “conversion”?