

Transforming Church
The Monroe Congregational Church
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Acts 9:1-19

We know that after his conversion on the road to Emmaus today... Saul ends up traveling the world to spread the message of Jesus' love.

He organizes new churches. He writes passionate, proud, poetic letters about what faith in Christ means and how to live it every day (within his historical context). He ends up in Rome, and dies a martyr, just like Stephen and countless others before and after him.

Two thousand years later, when we look back on the early church movement that became Christianity, that spread all over the world... there is no doubt who the most important figure in its development is (after Jesus of Nazareth, of course). It's this same, complicated man. It's Saul.

But before we get too far down the road with Saul, I'd like to ask you a question... *In your experience, do people ever really change?*

If you have ever worked closely with someone else in a job or academic setting...

or if you have a complicated person in your nuclear or extended family...

or maybe you have been in a committed relationship with all of its ups and downs, joys and sorrows...

or if you have friends with their own personalities and passions...
(does that cover all of us, yet?)

Well, then you probably wondered about this question, too...

Do people ever really change?

Now, I know how I should answer that question, pastorally. I'm supposed to say, "*Of course, people change all the time! Look right here, Saul does. The Bible is full of stories of transformation.*"

However... I need to preach what I feel, to be as authentic and true as possible when stepping into this pulpit. And friends, today I carry some skepticism, and it comes mainly from two places.

The first is this: I think our Western culture accepts stories of transformation a little too easily from its celebrities and politicians and powerful people.

Now, maybe our society took this custom from our Puritan roots, where you had to testify about your conversion in front of the church, to get welcomed into the elect and become a member.

Because we seem to be particularly enamored with tales that describe someone's ascent from averageness to greatness, we scarf the stories down like soft serve ice cream on vacation!

For example,

- Elvis Presley was told by a career counselor that he should become a truck driver.
- Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team.
- Oprah Winfrey was fired as a news anchor early in her career for being too emotionally invested in the stories she aired.

And I wonder... for every one of those rise to glory cases, how many didn't make the cut?

The second part of my skepticism on whether people can really change comes from what we might call the typical "*fall from grace*" story.

Whether it's a comedian like Louis CK, or an actor like Will Smith, or a company like Facebook... we've all seen people in power try and leverage their "*story of transformation*" to their advantage, as they desperately attempt to change the trajectory of a bad narrative.

It usually goes like this: Wealthy, privileged person messes up. They get caught. They apologize. And then after a little while, they are back in the spotlight, behaving more or less like they did before. We forget because we've all moved on to the next big thing.

And on a much more personal level... I have known quite a few people who have been deeply hurt because they were in relationships where the other person needed to change but has been unable.

Some dangerous or painful behavior was happening. And the other person promised they'd do better. And the one being hurt believed them or wanted to believe them. But then the dangerous or painful behavior happened again. And the cycle began all over.

These are examples of what the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer brilliantly called, "cheap grace."

Cheap grace is forgiveness which is announced and received, but not really earned.

It's mercy, without the hard work of repentance.

It's the twelfth step of AA or Al Anon, without the fifth step of saying sorry.

It's "transformation," without change.

Someone once told me a story about Zusha, a great medieval Rabbi. Zusha was at the end of his life. And he was troubled about something.

And his students all said, "*Rabbi, don't worry! After all the good deeds you have done, God will certainly welcome you with a great reward in heaven!*"

And the Rabbi said, "*No...When I get to heaven, I think God's going to ask me one question. And God's not going to say, 'Why weren't you more like Moses?' or 'Why weren't you more like Sarah?' No, my God will ask, 'Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?'*"

For Zusha, and for Saul, and for us... change... true change, real change, actually means becoming more ourselves.

After all, when Saul started following Jesus... it's not like this intense man suddenly became a tie-dye-wearing hippie! His letters still show that he was a fiery person who most likely rubbed people the wrong way from time to time.

But now, Paul was who he was... for God's love. All his energy and all his passion were focused on God.

So when we pray for transformation, for ourselves and others... maybe this is what we should ask for: *To be more authentically who God made us to be.*

And if we're praying for someone else... someone who is depressed or struggling with anxiety... Someone who is sick or isolated or who we fear is maybe on the wrong track...

Let our prayer first be to help that person find God's presence in that place. And learn to love themselves, in that place, today.

Jesus meets Paul right where he is, even on the way to persecute followers of the Way! Jesus reveals himself to Paul, and calls him to a changed life, a life of service. Paul experiences (maybe for the first time) firsthand

forgiveness, he is baptized and receives spiritual nourishment and strength. And for several days he remains with the disciples in Damascus because he has been warmly welcomed into that community.

What kind of Jesus follower would Saul have been if he had simply stayed put? How would he have learned about The Way if none of Jesus' followers had been willing to talk to him? What if the believers in Damascus had been unwilling to risk their own lives to get Saul out of the city safely? If you read through the letters by Paul that we have in the New Testament, you see the many ways in which the church has converted this man.

You see, Jesus meets Saul where he is, but he doesn't leave him there. Paul's life is changed forever because he's encountered Christ, he's been called, changed, nourished, and sent out to serve. It's a powerful pattern that we see repeated in scripture, and it's one that ought to seem familiar to us all.

In a moment, five of our younger members are coming to the Lord's Supper, for the very first time. And through this experience they join with us and others in this very same pattern. They have encountered the Risen Christ in the waters of Baptism, and in and through God's word as they've heard it read and preached and lived out in community, and they've learned it together in Sunday school with their beloved teachers.

And now, Jesus is inviting them to come and have breakfast, so that they, together with all who share in this meal, might know that they are part of something greater than themselves: God's Love and Forgiving Grace.

Saul's conversion was not only a result of his vision on the road. It was also due to the fierce love of the people of God that he experienced as a new member of The Way.

That's the thing about church. Our presence here—in worship, in study, in fellowship with each other—our presence with this church transforms the church, and the church, in turn, transforms us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Please remain seated, as we sing together Jesus, the Joy of Living Hearts, number 329 in your hymnal...