

Extreme and Not-So-Extreme Makeovers
Acts 9:1-19
Consecration Sunday
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I often say that the church is in the transformation business. You see that all the way through the scriptures—old and barren Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah, father and mother of God’s chosen people. Moses the murderer becomes Moses the liberator. Jacob the wily trickster becomes Israel, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Impulsive, wavering, bigmouth Simon the fisherman, the one who denies he even knows Jesus, becomes Peter, the rock on which Jesus would build the church.

But perhaps there is no story of transformation as radical and abrupt as our scripture for today. Saul the foremost persecutor of Christianity becomes Paul, its most zealous evangelist. The story of Paul’s conversion is a great story and a great witness to the power of Christ to touch someone’s heart and change their life.

But I sometimes wonder if this familiar story of Paul’s extraordinary conversion doesn’t do many of us a disservice. Paul’s story has become in many ways the prototype of becoming a Christian. Sudden, dramatic, vividly memorable.

But what if nothing like that ever happened to us? What if we have always been in the church? What if we can’t remember a time when Christ wasn’t a part of our lives? What if our conversion took place over time, rather than all at once? Does this mean our faith is somehow less valid or less real?

In the story of Paul’s conversion, I think most of us are less like Saul-turned-Paul than we are like Ananias. Ananias takes one small courageous step after another—

nothing big or dramatic like Paul who definitely has the starring role in the story. But Ananias has his small but important part to play as well. Paul may have had the dramatic conversion, but Ananias was also changed, in smaller, less dramatic but just as important ways.

For many of us becoming a Christian is a process—slow, wobbly, with many ups and downs. I like what rock star Bono has to say about his spiritual journey. *Your nature is a hard thing to change; it takes time.... I have heard of people who have life-changing, miraculous turnarounds, people set free from addiction after a single prayer, relationships saved where both parties "let go, and let God." But it was not like that for me. For all that "I was lost, I am found," it is probably more accurate to say, "I was really lost. I'm a little less so at the moment." And then a little less and a little less again. That to me is the spiritual life. The slow reworking and rebooting the computer at regular intervals, reading the small print of the service manual. It has slowly rebuilt me in a better image. It has taken years, though, and it is not over yet.*

It's taken years and it's not over yet. That's certainly true of me—and I bet it's true of many of us here this morning. The process of becoming Christian is a makeover—but it's not like one of those TV makeover shows where ugly ducklings become swans overnight, or a home that was a dump is made over into a show place. Television shows about extreme makeovers are great entertainment, but in the end, they don't have a lot to do with real life. The Christian faith, most of the time, is a not-so-extreme makeover. It is a process. It is a becoming.

It's a little like the story of the family who found an un-cracked robin's egg in their yard and brought it into the house to hatch. They made a little cotton nest and

placed the egg underneath a lamp, with a thermometer near by to make sure the egg was kept at the proper temperature. The mom placed a sign in front of the egg that said, “Shhh... I’m happening.”

We could all wear a sign around our necks that says, “I’m happening.” We are happening. We are growing, we are becoming. Sometimes, maybe, in big dramatic ways, but most of the time day by day, in small ways, we are growing closer to Christ. But this lifelong process of growing in faith is challenging and difficult. It is easy to begin to think “I’m good enough” or “I give enough” or “I know enough.” It is tempting to think we’ve figured things out, or that where we are is where we are supposed to be. But the truth is, no matter where we are in our spiritual journey, we are still called to grow.

That is why we need the church. So that we don’t fall victim to the temptation to become spiritually lazy and flabby. The church is here to prod us with the reminder that while God loves us just as we are, God loves us too much to let us stay just as we are. We are all on a journey. We are all still happening.

Author and preacher Tony Campolo said that when his wife, Peggy, was at home fulltime with their children and someone would ask, "And what is it that you do, my dear?" she would respond, "I am socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation."

Peggy Campolo might have intended to give a high-falutin’ description of what a mom does, but she was also describing the work of the church. The church is called to

mold and shape us until we are instruments for the transformation of all creation. That is not a job for the faint of heart—nor is it a job that we can do without a community of faith to support and encourage and guide us.

For the past few weeks we have been talking about “What a difference a church makes!” The differences the church has made in each of our lives may not have been sudden or dramatic, but the changes are there. How much less we would have been without the church. How much more indifferent to suffering. How much more fixed in our way of seeing things. How much more narrow in our outlook. How much more despairing because of the hard knocks life has dealt us. How often people have said to me in the midst of hard times—a long and painful illness, a sudden death, a family crisis—“How on earth do people get through something like this without their church!”

That is why your generous support of this congregation in the coming year is so important. Because without the church it is easy to give up and give in to a world that says this is the way things are and it is the way things will always be. Without the church, it is far too easy to lose our hope, our faith, our joy. It is far too easy just to lose our way.

Writer Anne Lamott puts it this way, When [my minister] was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

Lamott further writes: And that is why I have stayed so close to [my church]—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home.

In a spirit of thanksgiving for this community of faith that helps us to find our way home, let us bring our pledges for 2010 forward and place them in the chest as together we sing our Hymn of Consecration.