

1 Sermon, May 20, 2012

Texts: Acts 9:1-19, Acts 26:12-18

Title: Easter Renewal: Paul

1. Start with Ananias' Conversion
2. Paul's conversion was a full stop – and a later restart
3. Paul went from causing suffering to choosing suffering
4. Paul's conversion was not complete on the road: it took community
5. Suffering and Community – both counter-cultural

1. Start with Ananias' Conversion

Ananias lived in Damascus, a city that was ancient at the time, and now, almost 2,000 years later, still an important city. Ananias was a praying Christian. In fact, Ananias was praying when he received a vision from the Lord Jesus.

For Ananias, there was no sudden light from heaven, no being struck blind on the road. No, Ananias had a conversational relationship with the Lord, and when the Lord told him to go and see Saul, he objected that he'd heard about Saul and the persecutions Saul had been cooking up.

But Ananias was obedient, and went to the house of Judas and delivered the message that God had entrusted to him.

2. Paul's conversion was a full stop – and a later restart

The main character in the story, however, was Saul — Saul who had his conversion on the road to Damascus — Saul who *did* see bright lights and hear a voice speak to him, and whose sight and appetite were taken away.

For three days, Saul lived without sight, in a kind of tomb from which the loving hands of Ananias and the grace of God would rescue him.

Now, when I was younger, I was told that this conversion was so significant that Saul changed his name to Paul at that time. But I've learned recently that this probably wasn't the case. At the time, Jews often had two names: a Semitic one ("Saul") and a Roman or Greek one (Paul).

It was kind of like having one name at home among the family, and another name in public. I've known a number of Korean-Americans whose Korean name is not easy for Americans to pronounce, so they have an English nickname.

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In a sense, however, this experience on the Damascus road was a change of Identities for Saul.

It was a full stop for three days, during which he had time to examine his actions, and think about the words that Jesus spoke to him. Only after those three days did Ananias come to him, and *then* Paul received his sight.

Listen to how Paul described himself in Galatians:

You know how I used to live as a Jew. I was cruel to God's church and even tried to destroy it. I was a much better Jew than anyone else my own age, and I obeyed every law that our ancestors had given us. But even before I was born, God had chosen me. He was kind and had decided to show me his Son, so that I would announce his message to the Gentiles. (Galatians 1:13-16, CEV)

3. Paul went from causing suffering to choosing suffering

In the book of Acts, Saul is described before his conversion using language drawn from the world of raging beasts or maniacs. When we first meet Saul he is engaged in maniacal persecution of the church (8:3). The Greek word used there is *lumaino*--"to lay waste"). Ps. 80:13 uses this word: "The boar from the forest *ravages* it."

All of this changes for Saul/Paul. The raging beast becomes a man of peace. The man bent on persecution becomes persecuted. The one who causes suffering becomes the one who chooses suffering.

It was not going to be an easy road for Saul. The Lord said to Ananias: "Go! I have chosen Saul to tell foreigners, kings, and the people of Israel about me. I will show him how much he must *suffer* for worshiping in my name."

It's interesting. We've been talking in this Easter Season about people's lives being renewed. Here in the Bible, the risen Lord says that Paul will be transformed by suffering.

It's also interesting that Ananias' healing hands not only healed Paul of blindness, but brought Paul suffering for worshiping in Christ's name.

4, The controversy of redemptive suffering.

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Here is one of the biggest controversies of the Christian faith. Is suffering, in and of itself, redemptive? Does suffering itself make us better, or draw us closer to God?

In 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of his sufferings:

Five times I have received . . . forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked. . .

. . .and the list goes on. Then Paul says that his sufferings have strengthened him, and God's power has become perfect in Paul's weakness.

Paul treats his own suffering as redemptive -- as healing and transforming. But does that mean that *all* suffering is redemptive? Something in me rejects that suggestion.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said,

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. . . Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.

In 1958, Doctor King, in teaching nonviolence as a way of social change, held that suffering can educate and transform. He said that unearned suffering is redemptive and has tremendous educational and transforming possibilities.

He was speaking of social change, and for Dr. King, suffering was the price black people paid for standing up to the power structure and challenging segregation. If other people saw you being beaten or jailed for the cause, they might be moved by your suffering to change the status quo.

Was Dr. King right? Is unearned suffering redemptive?

Or, as one popular saying has it: "If it doesn't kill you, It'll make you stronger." – Is that really true?

My observation is that there is some suffering that is non-redemptive. There is some suffering that is senseless. I can't see how starvation in Sudan is redemptive.

However, suffering for a good cause *can* be redemptive. It *can* make us stronger.

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I also observe that suffering can provide a huge opportunity for God to change our hearts. Saul's heart was changed, in part through suffering.

Many, if not most, conversions come about as the result of suffering opening an opportunity to think differently. Conversions rarely come when all is well with the world. They come when we are low enough to admit our weakness and seek help. In our own Wesleyan tradition, John Wesley suffered deeply before his experience at Aldersgate Street. I could give many more examples.

Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

Suffering can be redemptive because it is often connected to love. When someone we love is suffering, it engages us on a deep level. It catches our attention; it reminds us of what's important.

When someone we love suffers and *dies*, their suffering helps *us* to let them go on their journey to heaven.

And when we choose to suffer *for someone else*, it is evidence of the love we have in our hearts.

5. Paul's conversion was not complete on the road: it took community

Still, there was more than suffering involved in Saul's conversion. Yes, he was made blind and his appetite was taken away. But it was the intervention another person who was willing to risk suffering that made the difference.

The risen Christ had spoken to Ananias, yet Ananias was still afraid. What if Saul really wasn't ready to be healed in Christ's name? Saul could put Ananias in jail or worse. Ananias risked suffering *because* he trusted in Christ, and the result of his trust was a changed Saul, and ultimately a changed world.

Saul was converted in part through the power of Christian community. Ananias came to Saul and called him "brother." He reached out to Saul and included Saul in the community of faith.

Could it be, then, that suffering is only redemptive when it is connected to love?

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That would mean that suffering caused by ill-will has no redemptive value. That would mean that suffering caused by natural disaster has no redeeming value.

But it also means that when love is added to it, when someone loves us enough to rescue us from suffering, or to comfort us, or to give us healing, then suffering can become redemptive.

I invite you to think and pray about it.

12 King Agrippa, one day I was on my way to Damascus with the authority and permission of the chief priests. **13** About noon I saw a light brighter than the sun. It flashed from heaven on me and on everyone traveling with me. **14** We all fell to the ground. Then I heard a voice say to me in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul, why are you so cruel to me? It's foolish to fight against me!"

15 "Who are you?" I asked.

Then the Lord answered, "I am Jesus! I am the one you are so cruel to. **16** Now stand up. I have appeared to you, because I have chosen you to be my servant. You are to tell others what you have learned about me and what I will show you later."

17 The Lord also said, "I will protect you from the Jews and from the Gentiles that I am sending you to. **18** I want you to open their eyes, so that they will turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then their sins will be forgiven, and by faith in me they will become part of God's holy people." (Acts 26:12-18, CEV)

Saul kept on threatening to kill the Lord's followers. He even went to the high priest **2** and asked for letters to the Jewish leaders in Damascus. He did this because he wanted to arrest and take to Jerusalem any man or woman who had accepted the Lord's Way. **[a]** **3** When Saul had almost reached Damascus, a bright light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. **4** He fell to the ground and heard a voice that said, "Saul! Saul! Why are you so cruel to me?"

5 "Who are you?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus," the Lord answered. "I am the one you are so cruel to.

6 Now get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do."

7 The men with Saul stood there speechless. They had heard the voice, but they had not seen anyone. **8** Saul got up from the ground, and when he opened his eyes, he could not see a thing.

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Someone then led him by the hand to Damascus, **9** and for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink.

10 A follower named Ananias lived in Damascus, and the Lord spoke to him in a vision. Ananias answered, "Lord, here I am."

11 The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the house of Judas on Straight Street. When you get there, you will find a man named Saul from the city of Tarsus. Saul is praying, **12** and he has seen a vision. He saw a man named Ananias coming to him and putting his hands on him, so that he could see again."

13 Ananias replied, "Lord, a lot of people have told me about the terrible things this man has done to your followers in Jerusalem.

14 Now the chief priests have given him the power to come here and arrest anyone who worships in your name."

15 The Lord said to Ananias, "Go! I have chosen him to tell foreigners, kings, and the people of Israel about me. **16** I will show him how much he must suffer for worshiping in my name."

17 Ananias left and went into the house where Saul was staying. Ananias placed his hands on him and said, "Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me. He is the same one who appeared to you along the road. He wants you to be able to see and to be filled with the Holy Spirit."

18 Suddenly something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see. He got up and was baptized. **19** Then he ate and felt much better. For several days Saul stayed with the Lord's followers in Damascus. (Acts 9:1-19, CEV)