

Easter 3C2010
Acts 9:1-20; Ps 30
Rev 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

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“Something like scales fell from [Paul’s] eyes, and his sight was restored.” (Acts 9:18)

Today is Passion and Purpose Sunday, the day when we are supposed to talk to you about vocation, about the ways in which God calls us to serve her in the world. Traditionally, I think, people tend to think of vocations as calls to serve as a priest, deacon, monk, or nun, but nothing could be farther from the truth. It doesn’t take too long in this gig to realize two things: first, the priest is rarely (if ever) the best disciple in the congregation, and second, there are a lot of Christians, in all walks of life, living their vocations with passion and purpose, doing what they can to live their faith in the stuff of their everyday lives.

If you wanted to see passion and purpose in action, there were few better places to have been than Woodbridge last Thursday, when the Central New Jersey Chapter of the United Way honored those it calls “Hometown Heroes” -- deeply committed volunteers whose work is making a substantive difference in the towns around us. I was there because two of our parishioners, Gwen Greenberg and Marie Thompson, were being honored for their service: Marie, for years of work to reduce violence and provide positive interventions for youth in Franklin County, and Gwen for her work to reduce hunger and poverty through the Christ Church Food Pantry. It was a night of inspiring stories: a woman who was a foster parent for special-needs kids, taking in sixty over the course of twenty years; teenagers who gave hours of their time to help care for animals in shelters; a former gang member who had turned his life around and then volunteered his time as a mentor, helping other teenaged boys get out of gangs through the program which had helped him; the woman who had planted Fish Hospitality Network in Piscataway, providing shelter, over the years, to more than a thirteen hundred people; even a woman who had staffed a clothes closet three days a week for forty years! Each of these people had seen a need in his or her community and responded to it generously, finding in their avocation a deep sense of purpose and meaning for their lives. And, in each case, their call was served as an avocation: not as the means by which they earned their bread, but as the time they gave, outside of other compensation, to the people and causes that they loved.

Fredrick Buechner, in an often-quoted remark, defines vocation as “the place where the heart’s deep joy meets the world’s great need,” and that joy was very much in evidence on Thursday. But I think that it might be more useful, at least in the initial stages of a call, to say that it’s where the heart’s deep *resistance* meets the world’s great need; for some reason, the call of Christ often leads us to the very places we do not wish to go, and the joy we find is the great joy of learning that God is with us even there.

Ananias’ call, buried in the middle of the story of Saul’s conversion, is a case in point. Saul, a leading disciple of the Pharisees, was raging against the followers of Christ, whom he saw as blasphemers, followers of a false messiah who were trying to lead the whole body of the Jewish people astray. There had been several so-called messiahs in recent years, and, in each case, the result had been increased repression of the whole Jewish people, so Saul had secular as well as religious reasons to be frightened and offended. So Saul went to the Jewish leaders and got letter authorizing him to suppress the disciples of Christ in Damascus, only to be knocked off his horse and blinded by that very same Christ while on the road. To the frightened disciples in Damascus, this must have looked like the salvation of God.

But then God came to Syrian believer named Ananias and asked him to go heal Saul and restore his sight. The call was a nightmare. For all Ananias knew, he would be putting not only

himself, but all those he knew and loved, at risk, liberating and restoring their passionate enemy. And so he protests to God, “Lord, I have heard much about this man,” reminding God of all the damage that Saul has done. (Acts 9:13) Yes, healing was an act of God, but did he really have to heal the enemy of his people? Yes, Christ had died for the ungodly, but did he really have to do good to a persecutor of the church? But God insists, “Go, for he is an instrument I have chosen to bring my name to Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” (Acts 9:15-16) And so Ananias goes and lays his hands on Saul, and then, in a moment of supreme courage, he calls Saul “brother.” Like Esau addressing Jacob, Ananias claims kinship with this man who has wronged him. He reaches through his own hesitation and resentment and fear, and draws upon the love which God has for this man, and something like scales falls from Saul’s eyes, and Saul’s sight is restored -- and so is Ananias’ heart.

So often, that is the way of it. God calls us, not to service as the world defines it -- service of good people, kind people who are a little down on their luck-- but to a kind of holy insanity, doing what is imprudent because it might be holy, going where we do not wish to go because that is the place where we encounter the risen Christ. When Saul was called to serve the very God he had been persecuting, he exhibited that kind of call. Scripture tells us: “immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying ‘He is the Son of God.’ All who heard him were amazed and said, ‘Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked his name?’” (Acts 9:20-21) Saul’s proclamation had more credibility because people knew of his own skepticism about the very truth he had come to proclaim.

Peter, too, faithful, clownish Peter, is warned right at the beginning of his work: “When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (John 21:18) There is a point in each of our lives when the call of Christ draws us from the place of our joy to the place of our fear, a point at which only faithfulness can lead us through.

But the mystery of Christ, the mystery of resurrection, is that it is in precisely those places that we find for ourselves the healing power of God, reaching through our own fear and hesitation and anger and rejection to bring us to fullness of life. For myself, I spent twenty years refusing to become a Christian and a priest. I knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that that was the thing I did not wish to do with my life, however much God seemed to want it of me. To do that would mean embracing the enemy of my people: men and women who had been marked on their foreheads by the same cross which had been imposed on my people, blasphemously, as they were marched into the forced labor and gas ovens of Auschwitz, Belsen, Birkenau, and Terezin. These people, who followed a God who had been crucified as an innocent man, and yet who had not hesitated to slaughter other innocent people in his name—I did not want to claim as kin. I did not blame all Christians for what had happened -- many of the ones I knew personally were good people -- but I did not want to have to love them or to serve their God.

But like the disciples fishing on the lake and catching nothing, I found that nothing else brought in a harvest for my soul. I could succeed on my own terms; I could win fellowships and earn degrees and write papers in my chosen field, but the more I succeeded as an academic, the less any of it meant to me. It could bring me acclaim, but not purpose; it could not awake the passion in my heart. The fields which I was harvesting were barren for me, and, if I wanted to be whole, I had no recourse but to choose the way of Christ. And to find there, against every instinct, a joy and freedom and peace which I had never thought to find.

So often, I think, that is the way of it. We find the path Christ intends for us, not, as Buechner suggests, by following our joy, but by following our fear, because that is what leads us to the place we need to be healed. We turn and we twist; we seek to run away; but, in the end, we come

to the end of our own resources and have no choice other than to rely solely upon the word of God. The things which cripple our soul will yield only to his touch; the wholeness we crave comes at us through the cross: the place in our lives at which we must put to death our own un-love and rise anew to the all-encompassing love of Christ Jesus.

The Armenian theologian Vigen Guroian has said that “the memory of Paradise keeps us alive.”¹ What he means, I think, is that each of us has had, at various points in our lives, a deep and intimate sense of being whole, of being loved, of being cared for, of being, for a moment, in the presence of God, and that we live out of those moments, seeking, on some deep level, to return to the home we sensed was there for us. For Guroian, it was the gardens of his youth, the gardens which his parents and their friends constructed in America in order to recall their own lost gardens in Armenia, the ones which they had lost in fleeing genocide. And so there was a deep chain of belonging leading back to a lost childhood, a lost homeland, a host of lost Edens drawing us home.

But the paradise we seek leads us not only backward, but into the future, for most of us find that place again in the joy which we find at our own personal cross, the joy which comes from living as a forgiven human being. When Peter, despondent, knew that he had denied his Lord three times, Jesus came to him and asked him to renew his love, three times, asking, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” And when Peter replies, *Yes! yes! I love you, You know that I love you*, Christ commissions him, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:17) And when Saul realizes that he has been kicking against the very God who reigns in heaven, God does not hold it against him, but sends him a healer, and then sends him to preach the Gospel. “He is an instrument,” God tells Ananias, “whom I have chosen.” And if there is suffering in their calls, it is subsumed in joy.

St. Paul writes, “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord....I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead... Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:7-8, 10, 13-14) *Forgetting what lies behind* --forgetting the brokenness, forgetting his own failure, forgetting his sins because Christ has forgotten them, too, because they have no lasting hold on us once we live in Christ -- *I press on toward the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

A number of years ago, in a different congregation, a woman came to me in pain because, more than ten years earlier, she had been unfaithful to her husband. And we prayed over it for a while, and asked for forgiveness, and spoke, and she went home. And I did not think of it again. But after several months, she came again to my office and closed the door, and said to me, “Deborah, I told him.” And I waited, and she began to weep and her whole face was suffused with joy, and she said, “He forgave me! He just reached out his arms and embraced me and told me he loved me; that what had happened was over, and he loved me.” It was a moment of sheer grace, not only for the past demon which was gone, but for what it said about their future together: a future founded on forgiveness, on the kind of love which would not allow anything to hold them apart from one another.

That is the love we have been given in Christ, the love which gives our life meaning and purpose. Not a fragile love which can be shattered by failure, but a deep and abiding joy which awaits for us whenever we remember it is there and enter it again. It is a “Paradise within us, happier far”² than any paradise outside us in the world. For those homes we can lose, but the love of Christ

¹ Interview with Krista Tippet, *Speaking of Faith*, April 9, 2009.

² John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

is with us always. And when we live from that place of forgiveness, the shackles which had seemed to bind us -- the shackles of fear, of loss, of grief, of resentment or anger -- fall away. They have no power over a forgiven people. In Christ, we find a radical freedom which sets us free to love even where there was no love, free to live the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory in our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Cor 15:57)