

ACTS OF TRANSFORMATION

Acts 9:1-20

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Avon Lake UCC
9 May 2021
(online worship only)

The young man had changed so much I barely recognized him. He is the son of a friend of mine. I saw two pictures of him, one from seven years ago, and one from this spring. Seven years ago, he was a butcher living in Boston. He writes this about his life then, “I was eating insanely decadent food and drinking a ludicrous amount of straight Bourbon, among other things. I was miserable and my life had become completely unmanageable. It took a long time for me to ask for help and find the courage to change.” It wasn’t a straight path, and I don’t know all of the details of the route he took, but now he lives in India and practices yoga every day. He is completely transformed. He says about himself, “I remind myself every day of the amount of emotional, physical and spiritual work I needed to put in to get here, and that I need to work to maintain. The biggest difference in myself is internal. What I like best about the change in my physical appearance is my smile.”

I don’t want to show you the pictures I saw of him because I don’t want this sermon to seem like some sort of reality TV weight loss show. Our topic for today is transformation, and yes - sometimes transformation is physical - but transformation stories in the Bible are about changes that occur from the **inside**. People see an opportunity to change, they hear a call, they feel a claim on their lives - and they respond.

Abraham leaves the life he’d known, and even in his old age, believes that God has a plan to make him the ancestor of a great nation. God even gives him a new name. His wife Sarah never thought she’d be celebrating Mother’s Day - she laughs out loud when God tells her she’s going to have a child. Their lives change.

Moses doesn't want to be a leader; he doesn't think he has what it takes, but God sees him a different way.

Mary is transformed from an unknown young girl into the strong mother of Jesus.

Zacchaeus the hated tax collector becomes Zacchaeus the one who hosted Jesus in his home - the one who gave away half of his money.

And in our story for today, we meet Saul. Saul first appears in Acts, chapter 7. There he approves of the death of Stephen the apostle, and he leads a violent persecution of the Christian community. Saul was ravaging the church, entering house after house, dragging off men and women, and committing them to prison. Saul is introduced to us as a violent, active, resourceful persecutor of the community.

God intervenes in Saul's life, just as we read last week of God intervening in the life of the Ethiopian eunuch.

The fact that God intervenes is not so surprising. The New Testament tells us of this kind of miraculous activity. Sick people are being healed. Dead people are getting a second chance at life. The good news is spreading. Maybe God will make a statement with Saul's life, teach people a lesson. Let them know that this God is not to be messed with. Maybe a lightning bolt will strike Saul down. Oh, not kill him, but hurt him, put him in his place. Another kind of god might have chosen that tactic.

But we have a God, don't we, of second chances? A God who loves nothing better than a good transformation story, and they don't come any better than this one. Saul, the Persecutor of Christians becomes Paul, the Salesman of the Year for the Christian Gospel. Saul, who once hunted down Christians becomes the Church's Most Successful

Entrepreneur and Cheerleader. His letters are being read at this very moment in thousands if not millions of worship places. His words are memorized.

This is how it happens. Saul is ready to go to Damascus to arrest more Christians. When he arrives at the outskirts of the city, he is dazed by a blinding flash of light. He falls to the ground and hears a voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?"

"Who are you?," Saul asks. "I am Jesus. Now go into the city and I'll tell you what to do next."

Saul has been blinded by the light, but his friends - who have no idea what's going on - lead him into Damascus. There he remains blind for three days. He doesn't have anything to eat or drink.

If this detail in the story makes you think about the three days from Good Friday to Easter, that's exactly what the storyteller intends. This is another transformation story. We know what happened after Jesus spent three days in the tomb - Easter happened - and the world has not been the same since.

If I had to sum up the message of this sermon in three words, it would be these: "People can change." Abraham and Sarah changed. They became parents, they learned to trust in God's promises. Moses gained confidence and became a true leader. Mary became a wise and compassionate mother. Zacchaeus put aside the ways of greed and discovered the joy of generosity. People can change.

But let's face it. Not all people do change. Not all change is lasting. And if you've been hurt, if you've been burned, it can be hard to trust.

There is a disciple in the new church who lives in Damascus. His name is Ananias. He receives a vision in which he's told to go and find Saul. The Spirit of the Lord says to him, "Lay your hands on this man Saul so that he can see again."

Ananias wants to be faithful but he says to the Lord, "You can't be serious! Everyone's talking about this man. He's Enemy Number One!"

God says, "Don't argue. Go. I have chosen Saul to be my personal representative."

To his great credit, Ananias listens. Ananias does what God asks. He finds Saul, he touches him and he says to him, "Brother Saul." "**Brother Saul.**" From an enemy to a brother in as much time as it takes for one person to touch another. Ananias sets aside all of his doubts, all of the skepticism he logically holds. Instead, he chooses to believe in what God can do. He chooses to believe in God's transformative power.

People can change.

We know Saul changed for good. He changed so much that he needs a new name - we know him as Paul, and we know the end of the story. We know about the churches he founded, the churches he visited, the ones he loved and cared about and encouraged through his letters and travels. We know he suffered because of his faith, spending time in jail, enduring some of the same persecution he himself had inflicted on others.

There's an interesting fact about Paul's life. It's rather hidden in the New Testament, but you can piece it together. After this dramatic conversion event, Paul goes back to his hometown of Tarsus, and he spends considerable time there before he begins his ministry. It's hard to know exactly how long, but the best guess is ten years. Ten years is a long time for anyone - but especially for someone whose life expectancy would have been about 35. All we can do is wonder about this time. Did he help his father in the family business of tentmaking? Did he spend hours every day praying, preparing himself for the work ahead of him? Was he anxious, or was he patient, or was he a little bit of both?

All we know for sure is that for most of us, transformation takes time. My friend in India practices yoga three hours a day, every day. People in Twelve Step programs remind themselves to live “one day at a time.” You might be able to identify one moment when you decided to change, but implementing that change takes time. You have to develop muscle memory by practicing. Every day you practice sobriety. Every day you practice forgiveness. Every day you practice empathy. And eventually you become a person who is more forgiving, more empathetic. More patient, starting with yourself. People can change.

Claude Thomas suffered for years from the trauma of war he experienced as a Vietnam combat veteran. For decades, he never slept more than two consecutive hours. He tells his story this way: “I had night terrors. I would hear the sounds of artillery firing in the distance, helicopters on assault, the sound of small arms fire and the wounded screaming for a medic. I fought and struggled with my inability to sleep, and the more I fought, the more difficult my nights became. I turned to alcohol and drugs for relief, but my suffering just got worse.

One day, looking out my kitchen window, watching a squirrel play in the woods, I thought to myself, “What if I just accepted the fact that I can’t sleep? Stop resisting it, stop fighting it. That day, I started living with the reality of who I was. I stopped being afraid of it. I began to heal, to experience peace and freedom.”

People can change.

The hard part of transformation is that it almost always involves stopping something completely, leaving one way of life behind. Change happens over time, but it starts when we decide that we will make way for something new.

I have been reading articles and attending seminars on the post-pandemic church, engaging in conversations with people who are focused on how the church can thrive in the future. Here is a question that rises to the surface: “What do we need to **stop** doing in order to live out our mission as faithfully as possible?” It’s a question that causes us to ask further, hard questions, like, “What are the programs that no longer fit our larger purpose? What ministries are no longer vital?” In order to be the church God needs us to be in this time, we will need to create room in our budgets and schedules for something new to emerge.

It’s a good question to ask of our own individual lives, as well. What habits no longer serve you? Are you holding on to traditions that are no longer meaningful? As you consider your life’s purpose, what are you being called to let go of so that you have room in your heart, mind and soul - not to mention calendar - for something new?

People can change.

There’s a word for this precise moment in time. The word is “liminal.” It describes a time of transition, a border or boundary between one experience and another. We are nearing the end of this pandemic with all of its quarantines and cancellations, and we are nearing the beginning of a return to our busy lives and full schedules. But we’re not there yet. In this in-between time, we have a unique opportunity to reflect on the way we want our lives to be. What do we need to **stop** doing in order to live out our mission as faithfully as possible? It’s a question that will help us move towards transformation. We can change! Our lives can change! We don’t have to live the way we did before. If there were aspects of your life that felt out of balance and unhealthy, this is the time to decide to let them go.

These three words contain so much hope and good news: “People can change.” When we realize that we are accepted and loved, and that what God wants for us is for us to live whole and healthy lives, we can make lasting changes, and then we can help God transform the world for the better.

Let us pray. Today, God, we pray for the wisdom to discern the kind of lives to which you call us, as individuals and as a community. Help us to take the time to reflect and give us the courage to change, all for the sake of your vision of a better world. We pray in the name of Jesus the risen Christ. Amen.