

I speak to you in the name of the Risen Lord. *Amen.*

The late Flannery O'Connor, well known for both her fiction and her faith, once said of the Apostle Paul, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse." Although as far as we know he was not on a horse on the road to Damascus, O'Connor's point is well made. The story of Saul's conversion is so important that Luke wrote about it in three different passages in the Acts of the Apostles. In today's lesson, we hear Luke's narrative of the event that changed Saul's life, enabling him to become the Apostle to the Gentiles and a wise teacher to the early churches. In Chapters 22 and 26, we hear the story in Paul's own voice, as he defends himself against those who seek to kill him because he proclaimed Christ as Lord.

Although it bears some similarity to repentance, conversion is different. To repent is "to feel or show that you are sorry for something bad or wrong that you did and that you want to do what is right."¹ To convert is "to change (something) into a different form so that it can be used in a different way."² The difference in these words and what they mean reminds us where the power is located in the action. To repent is something we do ourselves; to convert is done *by* someone outside of that which is being changed. In our lives of faith and belief, *we* repent; but it is *God* who converts us, just as God converted Saul to Paul so that he could serve God in a new way.

To understand why Saul's conversion was so extreme, let's remember what he was up to before that day. We're first introduced to him in Acts Chapter 7 at the persecution and martyrdom of St. Stephen. In verse 58 we learn "they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." Chapter 8 begins by telling us that "Saul approved of their killing" of Stephen and "that day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem," with Saul "ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison."

Although his actions opposed God's new covenant in Christ, Paul was a Pharisee, doing what he believed was right. And he did it with conviction and energy, and—borrowing the words from our post-communion prayer—with some apparent gladness and singleness of heart. As the quote from Flannery O'Connor affirms, something drastic had to happen to change Saul into a different man so God could use him for God's purpose. No one except God could have made that change happen.

Now, Joseph Harvard, retired pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Durham, believes that the story of the Conversion of Saul contributes to a "faith inferiority complex"³ in some Christians who were raised in the church, study their Bibles, who consider prayer a vital part of their lives, who attend church regularly, and have never known a time when they were not Christians. Unless our faith is stagnant and inactive, we shouldn't believe that it's inferior just because we haven't been struck blind on the highway or experienced some other dramatic spiritual awakening. Remember that God has the ability to convert us when God's will and purpose calls for it. And sometimes what is needed in our lives of faith may not be God's conversion, but our repentance—to turn from doing what is wrong, or doing nothing at all, to doing that which pleases to God. We should always be asking where God is in our lives, in our words and in our actions. That is our Christian ideal.

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/>. Accessed 04/09/16.

² *Ibid.*

³ Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2009. P. 403.

This week, Greg Jarrell of QC Family Tree, a Christian community in West Charlotte, posted a persuasive opinion piece on Baptistnews.com. Titled “North Carolina: Seeming rather than being”, it recalls our state’s ideal, formed in its roots, to be a place “where the weak grow strong and the strong grow great.” He says “This is what we aspire to be,” and continues that “in North Carolina, we take pride in actually being that, not in just giving the appearance of it.” You might have guessed that he was sharing his opinion about the recent passage of House Bill 2, the so-called “Bathroom Bill,” which regulates the use of public facilities by transgendered persons. That isn’t all the bill accomplishes, but it the most conspicuous of its new regulations. Citing this and other actions by our state government, Greg Jarrell says North Carolina has lost our core ideal of *being* rather than *seeming*.

But it’s not only our state whose sense of purpose is lost in practice. The church herself is often under attack for this very thing, the hypocrisy of professing one thing and doing another, particularly in the ways we see and interact with others, especially folks who are different from us—whose race, gender, sexuality, country of origin, religion, economic position or any other thing you can think of—is not like our own. If we believe God created every one of us in God’s own image, and if we *say* we see Jesus in every human being, then we’re missing the boat in some big ways. Instead of fearing and judging others, we should be striving to share God’s love with them. Jesus wouldn’t condone discrimination any more than he would condone persecution. He might even consider discrimination our culture’s form of persecution.

Last week I attended a meeting for a new ministry in Rutherford County called NETworX, a Christian initiative that aims to help people by giving them the opportunity to climb out of the poverty that often makes their lives hopeless. Following Christian teachings, NETworX ignores all the differences between us by offering these folks the possibility and promise of better lives. One who has been helped by a similar program is Alma, a young Hispanic woman from Burke County. Alma’s family traveled regularly from their home in Mexico to the United States when she was a child, and moved permanently to North Carolina when she was eleven. Alma worked hard in school because she wanted to attend college; but despite her excellent grades and extracurricular activities, she was unable to gain admittance to a four-year university because she was undocumented. That also kept her from gainful employment and threatened her dream for her children to have a better life than her own.

Alma’s dream became real when she was invited to be part of this program that taught her life-changing skills and strategies and has continued to support her as she reaches her goals. She has become a legal resident moving toward US citizenship, a contributing citizen who serves on the boards of non-profit agencies; she works, attends school and cares for her family. No one could argue that her life has changed. As believers in God’s amazing power, as Alma is, we can agree that God was the author of her conversion. We can also agree that those who facilitated it were following the call of Christ to respect the dignity of every human being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Before he was struck blind on the Road to Damascus, before he was baptized to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ, before he became a lover of Christ and teacher of the church, Paul believed himself to be a righteous and worthy servant of God. Are we right when we think the same of ourselves? Are we *being* true disciples of Christ or do we only *seem* to be? We cannot say we love God with our whole heart, mind, strength, and soul if we disdain or ignore those who are different from us or who need our help to enjoy the blessings God intended for all of us.

Open us to your conversion, Lord God, as you see fit. May the scales drop from our eyes, may our sight be restored, may our strength be regained, so that we, like Saul, can truly be your servants, always proclaiming Jesus Christ. “He *is* the Son of God.” *Amen.*