Wholly Changed
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Acts 9:1-20

What does the word "conversion" mean to you? usually we think of it as making some sort of change of an existing infrastructure – for example, changing a house's heating system from oil to heat pumps, or changing a barn from an animal living space into human living space. When it comes to religious practice, our use of the word "conversion" usually means formally adopting a new set of beliefs along with a new community – as in, "I converted from the Roman Catholic Church" or "I converted to Judaism."

That kind of change isn't exactly what happens to Saulus Paulus of Tarsus when Jesus stops him dead in his tracks on the Damascus road and blinds him. However, we have called it that for centuries. The encounter effectively transforms Saul, the chief persecutor of Jesus' followers, into Paul, the champion of Jesus' teaching and legacy, and one of the architects of the early Church. This is more than a surface-level change. It's the embodiment of *metanoia* – a Godward turn which is very often marked by a complete change in outlook and manner of living we often couch in terms of repentance and amendment of life. The word isn't entirely accurate when it comes to describing what happened to Saul on that road, especially if "…we reduce it to meaning recruitment or even if we think it just means turning to God so that one will be saved or safe."[1]

[1] William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C Acts Passages from the Lectionary: Easter 3." https://billloader.com/CActsEaster3.htm [accessed April 28, 2025].

This event contains two critical items. The first is Paul's call to preach and teach in Jesus' name. The second is the appearance of the risen Jesus to deliver that call. Nearly all of these post-resurrection appearances feature him making some sort of invitation to a human to go and do in his name. For example, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus follows up his question "Peter, do you love me?" with a command to tend his sheep. In Paul's case in particular, both he and the narrator tie the encounter to "… Paul's sense of commission to bring the gospel of Christ to the wider world. It is, after all, not as though Jesus is thought to have finished what he was doing and changed [his mandate] to developing a loyalty program of admirers and worshippers. What came alive again in the Easter story was not just a person, but that person's passion and mission."[2]

To live out that passion and mission, Paul needs help. He's going to have to convince the community he's persecuted that he's really had a change of heart. There's also the looming, unspoken question about how that community will treat him as a former enemy. Both of these issues are especially relevant for us now. For one, how can we trust someone who has been hell-bent on destroying their perceived enemies and then suddenly changes their mind about the whole thing? And, how do we treat people whose speech and actions endanger us and our loved ones?

To answer the first question, the text itself has some large hints along the lines of that we don't do it by ourselves. Ananias' initial reaction of "you want me to do WHAT? For THAT guy?" - followed by Jesus' reassurance that it will be just fine – should tell us this. So too does the reaction of the Christian community in Jerusalem to Paul once he

[2] William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C Acts Passages from the Lectionary: Easter 3." https://billloader.com/CActsEaster3.htm [accessed April 28, 2025].

shows up there and starts preaching instead of harassing them. They're initially afraid of him and question what he's doing. However, after his friend Barnabas intervenes and tells the leaders what happened to Paul, they take Barnabas' word for it and let Paul do his thing. Their involvement is key. Their reactions demonstrate that they have, to some extent, tested Paul's very obvious call to stop persecuting his siblings, and instead teach and baptize in Jesus' name, and that they will continue to be involved with Paul's ministry in one way or another – for good or not for good.

The second question, of how we treat people whose speech and actions put others directly in danger, is harder. It requires enforcing boundaries to protect ourselves; in some cases, speaking unpleasant truths to the powerful; and, perhaps hardest of all, praying for our enemies and those who wish us harm. All three of these things require a degree of love we may not think we're capable of showing. But. Jesus said only to love other people. He said nothing about liking them… which is kind of what's at stake for Paul, here. His encounter with Jesus forces him to really see the people he hates for who they are, and to learn that they are people deserving of his love and acceptance.[3]

Since they are no longer an enemy to be destroyed, Paul is able to come to understand just how much damage he did by trying to force them to conform to Paul's own worldview. One commentary I read this week frames it like this: "[His] epiphany raises questions of how we treat, or ought to treat, those with whom we might have theological differences. It suggests that we treat them with respect not because we

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[3] Raj Nadella, "Commentary on Acts 9:1-6[7-20]." https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-Sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-91-6-7-20-5 [accessed April 28, 2025].

share a common theological or ideological space but simply because they deserve respect. This is not to suggest that any view, however extreme it might be, should be condoned, but to highlight that treating the theological other with respect entails “unseeing” them as enemies, letting our scales fall off and seeing them as fellow humans with whom we can be in conversation even as we disagree."[4]

Unseeing someone as an enemy is easier said than done. People don't exactly let go of their grudges easily, especially not when it comes to holding on to strong dislikes of people who we think are different and/or have wronged us in some way. I'm reminded of a confession *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk makes in the middle of the 1991 film *The Undiscovered Country*. In a candid moment while he and his trusted confidant Dr. McCoy are awaiting rescue from prison, Kirk admits that he'd just gotten used to hating the Klingons, a belligerent group of aliens, thanks to fighting with them repeatedly over the course of his lifetime in Starfleet. He couldn’t experience them as anything other than a hated enemy. His hatred brought him to the point where he couldn't hear their leader's legitimate offer of a negotiated peace with the sincerity with which it was offered. In that moment, he says, he's realized something important: that fear of the future, with its requisite changes in the *status quo*, is an incredibly powerful motivator for those who act violently to protect that *status quo*.

Kirk's epiphany is not nearly as dramatic or powerful as Paul's is. What those "AHA!" moments have in common for both men is that they mark a dramatic change in understanding of their place in the events unfolding around them. They clarify the actions both are called to take in order to meet the moment. That's not to say such a

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[4] Ibid.

change of heart is easy. As we know all too well from our own lived experiences, that kind of fundamental change often comes at a high price. What's more, it often takes something drastic like being zapped along the side of the road, or having Jesus himself ask us to go and do something because he needs us to. And here is where the hope in this story lies. Paul and Ananias both respond to their direct encounters with the risen Christ by fundamentally shifting their attitudes towards people who differ from them. They openly accept a lot of help both from Jesus and the other people in their communities to go and do the work they were asked to do. If they can do that, then we can, too.