

“Unlikely Conversions”
Acts 9:1-20
Andrew Foster Connors
7th Sunday in Easter / Ascension Sunday
May 24, 2020 during the Pandemic

Nobody wants a God who can come into your life at any moment and flip you upside down. It doesn't matter whether you are liberal, conservative, whatever gender, whatever race, whatever age - we prefer a God who settles down the chaos of our lives, not stirs it all up. I bet there are more Christians who identify more closely with Paul *before* his conversion than after. Saul was protecting his faith, defending it. He was fully convinced that he was doing God's will, which almost always seems like a recipe for disaster in the New Testament and in so many examples in the world. It's the religious leaders that seem most dangerous when we pray that God be on our side instead of asking God's help to transform our actions into alignment with God's will. Christians can be more like Saul than we care to admit. And then God intervenes - pow - right in the middle of his life and throws it upside down. Nobody wants a God who can come into your life at any moment and flip you upside down.

We want a “back to normal” God. Sometimes I feel as if our entire prayer life is oriented toward that kind of God. We pray for God to help us get through difficult times. We pray to God to help us have our health restored back to the way it was before. We sing hymns about God's power to settle things that are unsettled. Meanwhile God is out and about less interested in getting things back to normal and more interested in flipping tables, upending systems, transforming lives. That's what happens to everyone involved in this story. Paul is the obvious one, of course. We're happy about his transformation. He's transformed from church persecutor to church promoter. We all like that part of the story because he's not us. He's people like the kid who shot up the black churchgoers in Charleston. He's people like the neo-Nazis, the white nationalists, the violent extremists of every faith and nation. We like that part of the story. You can't outrun the long arm of God's justice - you, other people.

We count on that story. I'm still counting on it. Counting on leaders in the highest places to be put in their place by the Holy One of Israel who faced down Pharaoh, and Nebuchadrezzar, and Caesar, and Pilate, and the Confederacy, and Jim Crow, and apartheid. Oh yeah we love that story because for most of us it's about other people - people we don't like. That political leader that you detest so much that you can't even name him - the Voldemort of Scripture.

The problem with that approach is that it's easy to slip into the conclusion that there are “enemies of the church” who need to be “converted.” And those enemies get named as Jews, or people of other faiths, or godless liberals, or communists or

whatever blank you want to fill in. While there is no violence in this text, human beings tend to use texts like this to authorize it. But that's not the only problem with reading this text as though God's justice is only about converting other people to my way of thinking or your way of believing or our way of seeing.

The problem is that the delivery of justice from this God seems to involve more than just the people who have it coming to them. God's justice includes more than just the conversion of people we consider the "worst." It includes the conversion of people who would prefer to stay as far away as possible from people like Saul.

Look at what Ananias is asked to do in this text. Go and lay hands on your enemy. Go and lay hands on someone who has done evil things to your friends. Go to a person who you do not trust and bring them good news. We've already been told that Saul is breathing murder; that Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women and throwing them into prison. Ananias is sent to show compassion to that person!

No psychologist that I know would recommend this to a patient who's been abused. No political strategist would advise this as a way to win their agenda. There's advice against this kind of pathway all over social media. It's not up to the oppressed to have compassion on the oppressor, much less educate them, not according to justice proclaimers on the Internet. It's what I've been told in every kind of anti-oppression training I've ever been in. If Paul wants to be transformed, it's up to him to do his own work.

But God calls Ananias to go to that man who persecuted his friend and extend compassion. Lay your hands on your enemy and let him know that if he's really changed his ways there's a community ready to embrace him. Get so close to him in his weakened state that you have to see his humanity, not just his criminality.

Christian Piccolini does a similar kind of work. A former neo-Nazi who participated in violence against Jews and African-Americans he went through his own conversion process of seeing the light. It cost him everything - his business and the people who had become his family at age 14 when, isolated and estranged, he was recruited by the white supremacists who indoctrinated him. In a TED talk about his journey out of the movement, Piccolini talked about the potholes in people's lives that led them into white supremacist groups. Potholes - the things in life that we hit that nudge us off our path and if not dealt with, can lead us to become lost. Trauma, abuse, unemployment, neglect, untreated mental health conditions, even privilege itself. "If we hit enough potholes on our journey in life," Piccolini said, and we don't have the resources or the help to navigate around them and to pull us out, well, sometimes good people end up doing bad things."

I loved listening to Piccolini's TED talk for the first $\frac{3}{4}$ of it. All through it I could safely think to myself, this is about someone else's transformation, not mine. I'm not a

white nationalist or a neo Nazi. If anything, I steer clear of them. What a wonderful story about how a guy who is wrong, who has done terrible things, finally finds the right path. I loved that part of the story - guy who is wrong, finally sees the right. Guy who is wrong who has now helped over 100 people leave white supremacist groups. What a great story about other people. And then Picciolini came to the end of the talk and I realized this transformation really is about me. It's about you too.¹

[WATCH THE LAST MINUTE OF THE VIDEO HERE]

“What brought them out was receiving compassion from the people they least deserved it from, when they least deserved it.” That’s what Ananias is called to do. And he does it.

And look, I’m not naive. Not every enemy like Saul is safe for some of us to visit. Not every perpetrator will be humbled before you. Not every soul who sews evil will be transformed into a disciple of God’s bidding. Saul is opened by God to Ananias before Ananias ever arrives.

But as I see our nation continuing to divide, when wearing a mask or not wearing a mask becomes a political act in some places instead of just a health precaution, when our President actively tries to manipulate this moment into government vs. churches for political gain when going to church can be deadly from the transmission of the virus, in an election season that promises to be as bitter as ever, it seems to me that if we want to win more converts to God’s ways of justice, compassion, and grace then we are the ones who have to be first converted to believing that the people we oppose or who oppose us are possibly our future sisters and brothers, future co-conspirators in love and faith.

That’s hard, because nobody wants a God who can come into your life at any moment and flip you upside down. No one wants their life unraveled like that. We don’t want to be open to the possibility that some of our enemies could be friends. Sometimes we choose not to believe, because it feeds the illusion of our own control. Sometimes what we really long for is not the conversion of our enemies but their destruction, their public shame.

But sometimes the Spirit does transform a relationship. Sometimes the Lord is gracious to someone who we don’t think deserves it, and we have to decide what to do with that unexpected gift. Sometimes grace transforms us or the people we have opposed in ways we don’t understand. And people in the church, people of the Way, are called to expect that kind of transformation. To expect acts of the holy Spirit to change hearts and minds and communities in ways we don’t understand.

¹ “My Descent into America’s neo-Nazi Movement - and How I Got Out,” Ted Talk, https://www.ted.com/talks/christian_picciolini_my_descent_into_america_s_neo_nazi_movement_and_how_i_got_out?language=en

Easter just ended - don't worry I missed it too. It ended quietly this past Thursday with Jesus' ascension.² I don't really know what I think about Jesus floating away on clouds and stuff like that. But I do see that his departure creates a decision point for the disciples. A time of discernment when they have to decide if they are going to adopt the transformative ways that Jesus taught them now in his physical absence, or if they are going to go back to life "as normal."

In many ways, it's the quiet choice we're making all the time. It's the choice that is still before us now. Can we trust the way of Christ? Does compassion really transform people or does it just embolden bad behavior? Is undeserved grace really advisable or is it just something strong people take advantage of? Are neo Nazis and white nationalists and people who prioritize their own liberty more than the health and wellbeing of others really capable of transformation or are they just bad people? There's no way to avoid those questions and the choices they evoke.

What I can say is that every now and then, the dead are raised, the sick are healed, the powerful are brought to their knees. Every now and then, the Spirit acts and we have a front row seat. Somebody sees the light. Maybe it's somebody like Christian Piccioloini. Or maybe it's somebody like that neighbor you despise. Or maybe it's somebody in the highest position of power you can imagine. Or maybe it's somebody like you or me, lives unraveled by the God who can come into your life at any moment and flip you upside down.

The good news is that on the other side of that unraveling there is a community of people struggling on that way. A community with a place for you already reserved.

² Actually, I misspoke. Easter doesn't end until Pentecost Sunday, 50 days after Easter Sunday. Ascension Day is 40 days after Easter Day.