

Faith Inferiority Complex

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Back in the old church days, we used to have testimony time during the service, where folks could stand up and “share their testimony” either about their conversion experience or maybe a recent prayer or temptation experience or something like that. It was always great when someone described a dramatic conversion from a life of debauchery and depravity (always well-described) to a life of faith, belief and following Jesus. It sounded so Biblical, like Saul’s conversion we read this morning, where he was even persecuting believers, then knocked down and blinded by the appearance of the very one he was persecuting, Jesus Christ. That another Christian was asked to go to him and help him, at great risk to himself, was wonderful. That Saul, now called Paul, became a great Christian leader was so inspiring.

I always wished I had a great conversion story like that. My own testimony lacked a lot of drama, and no life of debauchery or depravity. I know many believers wish they’d been raised in church and never got into the messes they did – although, believe me, church folks can get in messes, too. But I somehow felt inferior in my testimony, like it was lacking & uninteresting. See, my folks began attending church when I was about 1 year old, and I grew up in Sunday School, pasting cotton balls on David’s sheep and trying to get as many colors as possible on Joseph’s coat of many colors. In the Baptist Church, the expectation is that a person has a “conviction” experience of the Holy Spirit, and goes forward at the time of the altar call at the end of every service, then is baptized by immersion as soon as possible. Mine happened when I was about 7 1/2, which, in retrospect was within a few months of my youngest sister’s death, where I started crying in church one morning and couldn’t stop, and folks told me I was now saved. I went forward that evening, and was baptized the next week. Trying to follow my pastor’s exhortations to evangelism, I immediately began working on my remaining sister, who told me I was actually pretty obnoxious. My childhood was spent trying to follow every single thing I heard from the pastor, Sunday School teachers, the evangelists brought in for revival meetings twice a year, my school teachers and my parents - which may have had something to do with my fears from my sister’s death. I was so scared of hurting God by sinning – and angering God, of course, or making Jesus suffer more, that I tried to do everything right, was conscientious to the point of obsession, and always felt guilty about everything. I was pretty much tied up in knots trying to be the best Christian ever. I don’t think I was a very fun person: intense - yes; high achiever – yes; fun to be around - not really.

There aren't a lot of people that have as dramatic a story as Saul / Paul. Perhaps we could say that there aren't a lot of people who needed to be knocked down as dramatically as Paul, either. Maybe he was the kind of intense personality who did 180's, dramatic turn-arounds, devoting 200% of his energy to any direction he faced. Actually, from his writings, it sounds like that was indeed his personality. Of course if he thought Christians were wrong, he would seek them out and destroy them! And of course when he became one himself, he became an ardent evangelist and theologizer! No one could accuse Paul of being laid back or mellow.

The thing is, that some people have dramatic conversion stories doesn't make our own stories any less important or less faithful. God seems to work uniquely with each of us in a way that best suits – of course, since God knows each of us so intimately, and from the inside out, that makes sense. There's an old joke about some people seeing a guy hitting his mule upside the head with a board – the people wondered why he was punishing the mule: his answer was, "I'm just getting his attention." Some people must take God more effort, and others might respond better to more subtle means. Knowing even the hairs on our heads, knowing and reading our hearts, God does what's effective to reach our own, unique self, and bring us closer in.

What Saul/Paul's story CAN show us all is the pattern of conversions, and give us some fine metaphors for understanding our own conversion experiences. There are places where all of us are blind - a teacher of mine used to say that we are all "uniquely blind" to our own issues and problems. The way Jesus put it was to chide folks for trying to get a splinter out of someone else's eye while having a log stuck in our own eye - ie criticizing every little things in other people and ignoring our own faults & problems, which may be considerable. Sometimes we fight the hardest against admitting something going on in ourselves – we probably know what it is unconsciously, and are resisting admitting it. An addiction, perhaps, if not to a substance then perhaps to a behavior. An attitude. Or we hold on to old ways of acting that don't really serve us well anymore. Then something opens our eyes, wakes us up to what's going on; perhaps someone confronts us, perhaps we bottom out. Maybe we just gradually "see," and begin to make changes.

We go through many conversion experiences as we mature and journey with God. I know in Saul / Paul's story it sounds like he goes from being the anti-Christian Saul to being ultra-Christian Paul in two sentences, but that's just the hindsight of the writer – learning to walk in faith is a life-long process. When we begin to follow Christ there may seem to be many changes right away – a different outlook, embracing different behaviors, going to church and all. And there are lots of new things to learn about the Scriptures, and the Bible characters. Letting Christ transform your life, however, takes our whole life – there are always more layers to peel away; there is always a call to go deeper, go

further. There's always another level of, well, sin: after the "don't murder" commandment – which is actually a lot to unpack in the first place - then there are all the levels of angers and put-downs, all the ways we disrespect or disregard others. And once we're sensitive to our own errors, then we begin to have our eyes opened to the things in our culture that we've taken in without a second thought, all the built-in injustices and inequalities between people that society seems to just tolerate and ignore. Attitudes about races or genders, for example; or attitudes about economic levels, or foreigners, or northerners, or whatever. Then perhaps there's an examination of business as usual. An insightful friend of mine once critiqued a local church for not seeing the justice of giving good benefits to their Christian Educator. She'd started part-time, gradually became full-time, but had no benefits in her salary package. I pointed out that Presbytery intentionally hired me as a contractor so they didn't have to give me benefits, either, and he got defensive, saying I agreed to it and all – I pointed out that I needed a job, and that they'd had me over a barrel – I took it because I had to, and the presbytery had been glad to overlook the justice aspect. I watched as his eyes were opened, and he saw how things just creep up on us sometimes, especially in regards to business things like trying to save money or make money or get a person to work for as little as you can. There's always another level where God can open our eyes to things we've been unconscious of. Our conversion never really ends. And of course, we realize that God has been doing a lot of spadework before that initial conversion appears as well. Some conversions only look sudden on the outside – God's Spirit has been working and working – and continues to do so all our lives.

Each of us is so precious to God that God will do whatever it takes to continue to pull us closer. In the journey with God through our life, conversions –or transformations – are always on the agenda, as God's new life takes root and begins to grow and blossom in us. It is the only journey worth taking, its the reason of being, as a matter of fact; and God guides each of our paths towards the desired end in its own unique way. So my testimony is no more important than anyone else's, nor is my testimony inferior to anyone else's. The same us each of us.

May we be open this day to the places where God is opening our eyes, may we have courage to look at and see those places where conversion needs to happen; and may we continue to value our journey with God through our lives. AMEN.