

Acts 9:1-6
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11-14
John 21:1-19

Easter 3C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Consent

I spent the beginning of this week at our annual clergy conference at Semiahmoo, a lovely place that sits on the shores of Boundary Bay just across the water from the Peace Arch Park. We had beautiful sunny and clear days, perfect for kayaking, birdwatching and beachcombing. Each evening as the sun began its descent into the Pacific Ocean, there was a bonfire on the beach. Looking at it from a distance, seeing people huddled around, heads bent together in intimate conversation – well, I couldn't help being reminded of the scene on the beach we encounter in John's gospel this morning. While it was the end of the day not the beginning, and it was marshmallows on sticks rather than fish on the grill, I had a sense of what it was to be invited into the intimacy of a meal around a charcoal fire with God's friends.

It's hard to imagine what the disciples must have been feeling like that morning, exhausted after a night of fruitless labor, just days after that amazing last supper and the shock of having their feet washed by the Master. They knew everything was changing, knew in their heads that Jesus was leaving, but heads are different than hearts or guts. So, when the political and religious authorities got serious and arrested Jesus, when Pilate succumbed to the crowds, when Jesus was beaten and finally nailed to a cross and hung up to die... well, they were shocked and even more terrified. And even when word came from Magdalene that the tomb was empty, that Jesus was alive again, even that didn't calm things down. That very night, they had huddled together in a locked room, terrified that the authorities would come for them next. A week later when Jesus came to them again, they were still hidden away and terrified. To say they were on emotional overload would be a ridiculous understatement. They were devastated. Everything they had believed in, everything they had given their work and their families and their very lives for seemed to be over and they were as far out on the emotional edge as a person can be. Most of us have some experience of, the horrible pit in your stomach, or the pressure in your chest that makes it hard to breathe.

What do you do when you're emotionally overloaded?

Some people drink, some work until all hours, some lose themselves in fantasy or worse. Me? I act just like those disciples did. I escape to my own upstairs room and lose myself in cookbooks, or in reruns of Columbo or Poirot. As for Peter, he decided to go fishing all night. Best to try to get back to normal.

When we read scripture one story at a time, or even part of one story at a time, we lose the thread and the reality that everything matters – what came before and what comes after. So, while at first glance it might seem the disciples were just plain dense in their inability to see Jesus when he was right in front of them, when we keep the whole story in our hearts, it's pretty easy

to understand them. It's amazing they're even willing to keep breathing with all they've been through. The whole world had fallen apart, so nothing was as it seemed.

It took both the beloved disciple and Peter the rock to fully recognize Jesus that early morning on the Sea of Galilee. Oh, the beloved disciple announced it was the Lord, but in John's gospel, to see Jesus is to believe in Jesus. And to believe in Jesus is to move ever closer to him, not just in our personal, spiritual relationships, but in patterning our lives after him. It is not enough to see the Lord and announce that he's been sighted, that's only the starting point. Our faith only comes to fulness in our actions. It's just what we were talking about last week – the way we love Jesus, is by loving one another. And the way we love one another is by caring for one another. That's what Jesus was getting at when he asked Peter *"Do you love me?"* those three times. Do you remember his answer? Each time Peter answered *Yes Lord, I love you, you know that I love you, you know everything...* each time Peter said yes, Jesus said love is a verb. Not so much something we feel, but something we do. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Jesus wasn't just offering three matching forgivenesses for the three times Peter had renounced him. Yes, that exchange allowed Peter to sort of take back his three renunciations, but that's not all that was happening. Jesus was making another very important point... loving God means taking care of God's people. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. I know my sheep and they know me - they will also know me when you love them, when you feed them, when you tend them.

It works the other direction too. When Saul was blinded by the light, when he fell to the ground and heard that big voice saying *"Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?"* it was Jesus saying *Whatever you do to my sheep you do to me. When you hurt them, you hurt me. Its not about feelings. It's about actions. When you hurt my people, when you hurt my creation, when you hurt yourselves, you aren't just hurting my feelings. You are hurting me.*

We only heard the very beginnings of Saul's conversion story, so I will tell you a little more. There are four different versions of this story, but they all share the notion that to persecute the followers of Jesus is to persecute Jesus himself, and that's what Saul was doing. It's easy not to like Saul, or Paul as he is called in Greek. He is arrogant. He is rude. He seems to say things about women that are at best exclusive and at worst, abusive. He was a man who had been more interested in keeping the religious institution intact than he was in truth, justice, mercy and love. In all four accounts of his conversion, Paul talks about his horrific persecution of the followers of the Way – they didn't use the word Christian back then. He had worked hard to rid the world of Jesus' followers, throwing them into prison, standing with the religious authorities, scheming to kill them because they deviated from the given religious tradition – the tradition that held at its heart the Law, which of course included *"Thou Shalt Not Kill."*

This is the sort of thing that happens when we get too wrapped up in right and wrong, when we are governed by rules or the way things have always been, when we're afraid things will change, afraid we will lose control of our perfectly ordered lives. Saul, and the clergy who were his allies, were losing control and when powerful people or even not-so-powerful people think they're losing control, they tighten their grip all the more. But sometimes something happens – it can

be a big something or a little something – but sometimes something happens and suddenly we see the light and we’re somehow changed. That’s a conversion – it’s what we call this story - the Conversion of Saul. It wasn’t his name that was converted – he was called Saul in Hebrew and Paul in Greek, it was his person. When Paul was blinded by the light on the road to Damascus, something happened to him that changed everything. He hadn’t been contemplating a new way of being. He hadn’t decided to confess his sins. He wasn’t working hard to be a better person, quite the contrary. He was on the road out of Jerusalem heading toward Damascus in search of damning evidence against the people of the Way so that he could eliminate them. And suddenly he saw the light, a light so blinding that it knocked him, blinded, to the ground and his friends had to walk him in to town where Ananias, one of the people of the Way cared for him and prayed over him until the scales fell from his eyes. And immediately he was baptized, ate some food, regained his strength and went into the synagogues, not to hunt down the followers of the Way, but to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

Quite the conversion! It’s no wonder Paul seems arrogant to us. He is zealous for sure, as zealous for Jesus as he was zealous to persecute Jesus’ followers only days before. But tell me, who else could have done the work Paul had been given to do? What milder personality could have been given the task of being the Apostle to the Gentiles? You see God will use whatever we offer, even an overbearing personality. Because when we let God convert us – and we do have to consent – everything changes because of love – God’s love and ours. Paul wasn’t worthy of the profound gift of faith he was given, and neither are we. Paul had done terrible, horrible things, things much worse than most of us will ever do. But God used Paul’s religious fervor to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. It isn’t about being good enough or smart enough, it’s about being willing. It’s about recognizing that we are the places God has chosen to dwell and acting out of that experience. When we allow ourselves to be converted, we experience ourselves as part of something much bigger than ourselves, the Body of Christ to be given for the life of the world.

No longer focused on perfect practices, following all the rules or getting things just right we are free to live from the reality that God dwells in us. We don’t do the right thing because we’re supposed to, we do the right thing because that is the only natural response for a converted person, a person who knows the absolutely stunning experience of God’s love. When we know, really know ourselves as God’s beloved, our only possible response to the world is love. We don’t do that because we’re supposed to... we do it because there is simply nothing else to do. When we have an experience of such love poured out for us and in to us, we pour out that love for others. Whatever you do for the least of mine, Jesus said, you do for me.

God is constantly offering us conversion experiences, and they are ours for the taking as long as we pay attention, and consent. They can be as big as the blinding light that knocked Paul to the ground or as simple as “try throwing your nets on the other side.” Big or small, it doesn’t matter – it only matters that we consent. What does God want to convert in you? And how will you respond? Amen.

