

Reflection: Faith Inferiority Complex

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John 21: 1-19; Acts 9: 1-20

I remember the time as a young adult when I was invited to attend the adult baptism of a good friend. This friend was a member of a sect of the Mennonite Brethren church and baptism was very different than what I was used to in the United Church. It was only adults, no infants, and it was full immersion in the tank in the middle of the sanctuary.

My friend had been preparing for her baptism for months—special classes, Sunday School and lifestyle changes. Because the candidates were all adults, before the actual act, they, similar to what parents do in our ritual, professed their faith before the gathered community. However what their profession looked like resembled more of a testimony to their faith and to what for them was like a conversion to life in Christ. Each of them had to witness to the moment in their life when they accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. It was powerful to absorb but its difference to my cultural faith norms made me a little uncomfortable at the same time. Some of their conversion stories seemed unbelievable. They could specify, often, particular times and dates and even locations for their acceptance of Jesus. I would never dream of discounting such testimonies even though they felt awkward from my side. But from that service I also came away feeling a little inadequate in my faith—why couldn't I name a particular Jesus moment—one moment when my faith was set on fire and everything was clear.

There is something in the life of faith and spirituality called a faith inferiority complex¹. It is like any other inferiority complex—the faith of someone else makes ours feel inadequate. Often this happens for many who were raised in the church and can't pinpoint a time when their faith came to life. Or it happens if you are a seeker and it seems those around you are so much more confident in what they believe or know.

The reading today from Luke's Acts of the Apostles has just such an impact for some of us. The story of Saul's conversion from someone who detested Christians—in fact from someone who was breathing threats and murder against disciples—into someone who transformed the Christians' church and impacted the known world of the time—is a fairly well known conversion story. It is dramatic. As he was going along, on route to Damascus to wreak havoc, a light flashed before Saul, engulfed him and drove him to the ground. A voice came from heaven and asked him why he was persecuting and the voice was said to

be Jesus himself. Blinded by the light of that appearance and the interaction, Saul is sent on his way to learn from others what will become a new life in Christ for him. He is sent on his way to have his figurative sight restored to live according to the ways of Christ and to spread the gospel. Since that time this conversion experience has been referred to as the Damascus Road experience. Even some non-Christians have a sense of it sometime. A sudden flash of light and someone's life is dramatically turned around. Oral history has even added to the story suggesting that Saul was on a horse and was knocked off his horse at the time—being knocked off his high horse—adding to the story-telling the drama of the kind of change enacted in Saul.

I can't tell you how many times I have sat in circles of Christians or as individuals where there is a pining for a Christian conversion story like that of Saul's. We can too easily be tempted into inferiority. We think that it would be nice to have the clarity that Saul had where we are turned from one way to another. Where the appearance and experience of God is so vivid that it knocks us to the ground and we go willingly into a new life of faith never to turn back. Where the voice of God comes to us and sends us on our way and all is well. And not only is it clear to us but it is clear to others around us. Undeniably. And wouldn't that be great.

The Damascus Road experience is actually talked about three times in the book of Acts which tells us of its authors' sense of importance. It was told to authorize Paul's ministry—of course. He wasn't one of the original apostles so he needed credentials. But it was told for another reason. Not so that we can remember Paul so much as we can remember God. The dramatic story is one that calls us to understand the workings and actions of God.

We have been invited, in this Easter season, to take the Easter challenge—of finding the appearances of the risen Christ; of finding the Easter moments in our time and place and then moving to a place of proclamation from those experiences. The Damascus Road story is told in the Easter season because it is another appearance of the risen Christ in that first Easter time. Here God, through Christ, appears to the most violent, feared, broken down murderous one around. To some, Saul appears as the one most unlikely to believe, most in need of being turned from something destructive to life-giving. And dare we say that in that moment God sees someone who has immense skill at being a persecutor could also have immense skill at being an advocate? This is about God's action and how God works to restore, reconcile, renew, love into being, transform, call to wholeness. And this is not about seeing how isn't it nice that God does that for a man called Saul—but instead to stand here in our time and wonder where and when God is doing this now. It is meant to tune us into knowing this nature of God in our own and others lives.

One of my favourite quotes about this tuning into of God comes from Nancy Reeves in her book: *I Would Say Yes God If I Knew What You Wanted*. In it she suggests that "God speaks to every person in the way they most need to hear." Clearly Saul in his destructive, violent persecution needed nothing less than to be knocked off his high horse or blinded by the light.

But we know there are other ways that such conversion/or call/or transformation can happen in human lives.

I recently saw another dramatic story which I think can bring a similar message to Luke's. I did not commit to doing a sermon series on Reel Theology but in hindsight, to my sermon illustrations, it might have been a good idea!

just saw the movie *Precious*. Maybe you have seen it? I know some people have avoided seeing it because they say it involves a particular emotional state. It is a difficult movie. In the movie a young, 16 year old Harlem girl has a starring role. Her name is Precious. Precious lives a life of pure trauma. She lives a life of abuse—physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse. She lives in poverty. She is, at 16, pregnant with her second child (the first she had at 12) a result of the continual rape by her own father.

Precious is morbidly obese, a result of her Mother force feeding her in an attempt to keep her ugly and unattractive. Her mother also, out of a deep self-hatred—physically and emotionally abuses Precious—breaking her spirit and any sense of self or esteem she might have left in her. In addition to her home life, Precious is teased and ridiculed on the streets and in her school. She is pushed down on the street for the sheer entertainment factor. Watching her character is painful.

But I like the movie—not because of what it displays but because it is real and it deals with real life issues—for this girl in Harlem—and for the ones in our own communities and homes. I also like the movie because of how it shows conversion. This is no Hollywood happy-ending story. It is one where we see, maybe, in tiny steps of belief and hope that one can change from a life of destruction and harm—not of their own doing this time—but because of what is done to them. Into a life of change and possibility. This is a conversion not of dramatic light but of persistence and resilience.

What turns Precious around? First a teacher...a teacher who sees not a 16 year old girl who can't read or write but someone who is good in Math and maybe that could take her somewhere. Then a principal who while simultaneously suspending her from school visits her in her home world of torture and suggests she go to an alternative school—maybe believing that if she just had the right chance she could make it. Then a teacher—who will not give up on her—

working for a school called *Each One, Teach One*. The movie shows inches of transformation begin to happen in Precious, mostly in the area of social services and psychological support. But there are moments when I see what we might call as a dramatic appearance of a God whose very nature is to push, pull, love, and call us out. A God whose very nature is to walk through the fires and the doubt and the pits of existence with us.

The dramatic moment (and don't worry, you can still see the movie) comes when Precious, even after sneaking out to school (one of the only places of a shadow of possibility for her) to try and turn her life around, learns that her father has died. Her father who sexually abused her from the time she was three years old has died of AIDS—and she has now tested positive herself for HIV. She is done. Precious is completely knocked down. She shows up at school and her teacher sits her down to write in her journal. But the moment has come when Precious has given up. "I don't feel like writing," she says. To which her teacher replies: "Write anyway. Write for yourself and write for the people that love you."

"But nobody loves me," says Precious. "Love done me no good. Love beat me, love hurt me, love called me names," and through her tears, "love made me sick." The teacher replies: "That was not love. Your baby loves you, I love you. Now write!" In her writing, letter by letter the teacher is calling Precious and her community of Peers into a life of possibility and empowerment.

I share this story because I believe it is a conversion story. Where someone is turned away from death and destruction toward possibility and hope. Where amidst extreme trauma someone is turned away from death to hope. And once again we are to see the nature and action of God in it. Wherever hearts are turned toward the better for self or other—whether it be by being knocked down or picked up and dusted off and embraced—there is the appearance of the holy.

And such stories are not meant to evoke faith inferiority but to build it. Our conversion stories may not be that dramatic. Or maybe they are waiting to unfold? Where are your illumined moments? Where are the appearances of God that take you from paths that are injurious to yourself or others to renewed living. Or where are the appearances that take on flesh and love you into being—past real hurts that debilitate so that you have just enough to turn and hope? We don't have to write the dramatic—but we are invited to trust and bear witness to a God whose very nature is to push, pull, call, love, transform and convert in a way we understand.

These conversions may not be one time events but gradual repetitive ones slowly or persistently arising in us. They may simply be soul vacancies that tune us in.

There is no hierarchy of type only a God who works through them.

May we meet and see this Easter challenge. Amen.

¹William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1986), 11.

From Joyce Rupp's Poem: ***Easter Challenge:***

Every year we hear the stories
The empty tomb, surprised grievers,
Runners with news and revelation,
Unexpected encounters,
Conversations on the road,
Tales of nets filling with fish,
And breakfast on a seashore.

And every year
The dull and dead in us
Meets our Easter challenge:
To be open to the unexpected,
To believe beyond our security,
To welcome God in every form,
And to trust in our own greening.

----Joyce Rupp