

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 21:1-19

Acts 9:1-20

Psalm 30

Revelation 5:11-14

May 1, 2022

The Third Sunday of Easter

How many of you have fudged a little on your resume? Maybe tried to make yourself sound a little smarter, a little more accomplished, a little more experienced than the next guy? Maybe you listed every single award you ever got...all the way back to blue ribbon from the middle school science fair for the volcano your parents help you make. Or as you might have embellished on your resume...received high honors for creativity at the innovation summit for up and coming leaders in the sciences.

But, what if you didn't add extra hubris to your list of accomplishments? What if instead you listed the things we typically don't like to admit about ourselves? As in...

- Cheated on my taxes and prayed I didn't get audited.
- Argued with my spouse and said things I regret.
- Forgot to let the dog out and blamed it on my little sister.
- Drank too much the other night and called in sick to work.

You get the idea. We don't like to admit those things about ourselves because we think that no one will want us if we do. So we cover up, hide, beat around the bush, and generally avoid the truth about who we are. We don't like to show our weakness, our faults, our sins. So, instead, we put on a good face and beef up our resume.

But down deep, don't we simply want to be valued for who we are...just as we are...the good and the bad. Don't we want to believe that our lives have value without trying to be someone we aren't? Don't we want to be forgiven and a second chance when we haven't done the right thing?

Let me say this...if you have ever been told you aren't good enough for God to love you, if you have ever been told you have done things not worthy of the church, if you have tried to be something you aren't just to live into some manufactured standard of value...well...throw those ideas out the door right now. Because they have no place here.

If you need some reassurance on this fact, let's look at our text from Acts. It's one of the pivotal "conversion" stories of the bible. (We will talk more about the idea of conversion in a moment). But, first, let's set the stage. Saul was a downright horrible human being. His resume would have read...highly skilled in various forms of torture, manipulation, interrogation, and execution. Disciple killer and Jesus hater. Scoundrel extraordinaire. He was the epidemic of evil and people were terrified of him.

And yet. And yet. What we learn from our text in Acts is that God loves him anyway. As horrible as he was, as many sins as he had committed, God loved Saul. On the road to Damascus God shines a light on Saul's heart and sees something beyond his sins, beyond his selfish, hateful and destructive actions. God sees his worth.

Now...this light isn't just a flash of light or a bolt of lightning. The word *light* in the Greek conveys to us that God in this moment has given Saul truth and knowledge. God has given him spiritual purity and the power to understand what is moral and right and good. It the kind of light that is transformational. It changes you. And this particular light is so powerful that it blinds Saul for three days.

I love this fact. In essence what is happening is that Saul - upon receiving this incredible knowledge about God's love for him - has to spend time in the darkness considering his past so that he can repent of his sins, seek forgiveness, and commit to change. In other words, he has to spend time in the dark before he can truly appreciate the light.

This detail in the story is critical. It tells us a couple of things. The first is that God's love is so incredibly powerful that it sees beyond anything we could ever do in opposition to God or to one another. The second thing we learn is that change isn't necessarily easy and, like Saul, it may take time. Because being honest about who we are and where we have been takes courage and vulnerability. And that can be a big ask.

But, hopefully, like Saul, we will be able to truly see ourselves and repent of things that we have done. For Saul, after the three days were over scales fell from his eyes and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. That is his moment of

conversion...when he accepts the light and commits to change. He sees the value of his life through God's eyes for the very first time. He made peace with a broken past and gave his life over to being God's faithful servant and becomes one of the greatest apostles for the Christian faith. Saul was transformed and became Paul.

Let me say a few things about Saul's conversion. I use the word "conversion" specifically because in my mind, it's one of those words that gets misused in religious circles and made to seem like a one and done decision.

But, conversion is just the opposite. When you think of conversion, I want you to think about a full transformation of your mind and your spirit. It is a claim that we have been changed. And so when we hear Jesus or Paul tell others to repent, what they are saying is "change", don't do back to the way things were. That means you can't keep doing the things you once did. Paul couldn't go back to his old ways once he was transformed. His conversion meant that he started to act differently, to treat others differently, to treat himself differently.

In the Greek, the word for repentance is *metanoia* which means a full shift, a 180 of who we have been to who God calls us to be. Have a change of mind, a change of life. That's what we mean when we talk about conversion. We acknowledge our brokenness, we ask for forgiveness, we commit to changing our lives, and when we fall short, we come back again and again to God's love for us. As one commentator stated, "Repentance is NOT asking the Lord for forgiveness with the intent to sin again. Repentance is an honest, regretful acknowledgement of sin with commitment to change. Repentance leads us to cultivate godliness while eradicating habits that lead into sin."

Jesus says just come as you are and let me shine a light into your heart. We can work together to transform what has been broken. We all know what brokenness feels like. We all know when we have done things we shouldn't have done. We all know when we have hurt ourselves and others. The Good News is that we can take those broken pieces and transform them into something beautiful.

But, first, we have to be honest about who we are and where we have been. Write that truth on your resume. Because God already knows you...all of you. And maybe that is the best news we could possibly hear....God loves you and calls you

forth to new abundant life. The old has passed away. New things have come. That is your conversion. Thanks be to God. Amen.