

“Paul’s second conversion”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 17:20-26 and Acts 16:16-34

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Let me tell you a story. It’s an old story. The great Henri Nouwen shares it in his book *The Wounded Healer*:

One day a young fugitive, trying to hide himself from the enemy, entered a small village. The people were kind to him and offered him a place to stay. But when the soldiers who sought the fugitive asked where he was hiding, everyone became very fearful. The soldiers threatened to burn the village and kill every man in it unless the young man were handed over to them before dawn. The people went to the minister and asked him what to do. The minister, torn between handing over the boy to the enemy or having his people killed, withdrew to his room and read his Bible, hoping to find an answer before dawn. After many hours, in the early morning his eyes fell on these words: “It is better that one man dies than the whole people be lost.” Then the minister closed the Bible, called the soldiers and told them where the boy was hidden. And after the soldiers led the fugitive away to be killed, there was a feast in the village because the minister had saved the lives of the people. But the minister did not celebrate. Overcome with a deep sadness, he remained in his room. That night an angel came to him, and asked, “What have you done?” He said: “I handed over the fugitive to the enemy.” Then the angel said: “But don’t you know that you have handed over the Messiah?” “How could I know?” the minister replied anxiously. Then the angel said: “If, instead of reading your Bible, you had visited this young man just once and looked into his eyes, you would have known.”

The minister was a good man. He knew his Scripture. He loved God. But for all his right ideas, he had not yet learned to see people through those ideas. The God he loved stood before him, and he could not see him.

In some ways, perhaps, we’re not unlike the minister. We’ve thought a lot about our faith, about Scripture and God. We’re great at adult forums and Sunday school and discussion groups. We’re eloquent in our talk of justice and love. But how often do we fail to see people through those ideas?

I’m guilty. For instance, I value the fact that we are a downtown church, but when yet another walk-in enters my study, I sometimes let out an inaudible sigh of frustration. Couldn’t they just go away? I have a sermon to write, a Bible study to prepare, emails to answer, a building to manage, a hospital to visit, meetings to attend... And yet how do I know that this weary soul is not Jesus Christ himself? And how do I know that caring for this person is not the most important thing I will do that day? That is, after all, the greatest commandment: to love God and neighbor, not to write sermons and be an effective administrator.

As long as I fail to see God in the other, as long as I do not embody the solidarity of which Jesus speaks to us today, my conversion—my turning toward God—is not yet complete.

The same would seem to be true for the apostle Paul in our story from Acts today. He's grown a lot already. Once Saul who persecuted Christians, he is now Paul, the great evangelist. Christ appeared to him on the road and converted him. Now Christianity is being preached in Europe. Gentiles and women are becoming leaders. Boundaries and old prejudices are breaking.

It's because Paul has this beautiful idea of a unified body of Christ, in which all members matter, in which all grieve and celebrate together. But today he meets a slave girl, and it is in this moment that we see Paul's conversion put to the test.

She's been following Paul for many days in the hot sun, calling out his identity, shouting about salvation. She's a broken record, a "broken hallelujah" (Leonard Cohen).

I imagine her, hanging on the periphery of the group of women at the riverside, whom we read about last week. I imagine her seeing Paul commission Lydia as a witness of the gospel. I imagine her hearing about Christ's ascension into heaven and how he asked the disciples to go forth, united as one body, and witness to a love so breathtaking, so amazing, that it broke the chains of death. Oh yes, I imagine her hearing that there is no longer slave or free, woman or man—that in the kingdom of God, all are free, servants to only one master: God.

Most interpreters will tell you Paul frees this woman as an act of righteous piety and concern. Unfortunately, that is not what the Scripture says. It says that many days passed before Paul did anything, and when he finally does, it isn't to help her; it's because he's annoyed. She is a nuisance, and Paul shuts her up. She is left unnamed, vulnerable, still a slave.

I get it. Paul feels like he's been running a race; he's tired, overwhelmed. Maybe, he just thinks she's not important enough. Maybe he doesn't yet understand the implications of the gospel. Or maybe he just can't see her, and his conversion is incomplete.

What happens next in the story is like that *Twilight Zone* episode where enemies switch bodies and see each other through the other's eyes.

Paul suddenly finds himself oppressed just like the girl. Now he's the one being accused of making a disturbance. Now he's the one considered an outsider, called a Jew and contrasted with "us" Romans. He is stripped and beaten like a slave. All his Roman male privilege is stripped from him. He's in jail; she may even be in that jail with him. And there, he's heard singing and praying incessantly at midnight, just like the girl who would not be quiet.

It is a unifying moment, when suddenly Paul has the chance to see the girl he dismissed. It's an opportunity for empathy and learning that disruptions can be holy. Suddenly, he is her, and she is him.

This experience leads to the conversion of the jailer and his family. The jailer asks what he must do to be saved; he asks, because he heard that they knew. He heard it from the slave girl, who told the whole town.

I would like to think that it's at this moment that Paul undergoes a second conversion and realizes how important this girl is, repents and sees her, loves her, for the first time.

Did Paul make the connection? The text doesn't say. Is it this experience that returns him to Lydia's home, perhaps with the girl, so that she too can learn and become a disciple? Is this why, following this story, leading women join Paul's ministry; why people get so upset that he's "turning the world upside down"? Is this what leads him to proclaim that there is no longer male or female, no longer slave or free, and to insist that nothing is more important than love? Or does he miss it altogether, and go on to write about women being silent in church and being submissive to men?

We don't know. What we do know is that the text has provided *us* with the connection. Maybe this was Paul's second conversion; maybe not. But it should be ours.

Every day, God brings people into our lives that disrupt and challenge us. God gives us the opportunity to see the world through their eyes, to love them, and in loving them, to know that they're a part of us, and we're a part of them. Should we take the risk of lifting our gaze from the comfort of our ideas, and look long into the eyes of those around us, we may just see at last what all our ideas could never provide: the Messiah. Maybe this time we won't send him away.

Amen.