

Are you ready for change?

Sunday, May 5, 2019

Acts 9:1-6

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

One day last week, a family in Chicago went out shopping. They headed out in search of birthday presents for their youngest son. As they were shopping, the youngest son



finds his sister and says, “Hey, I need to tell you something. Promise me you won’t get mad.” “What is it?” she asks. He holds up a beautiful red St. Louis Cardinal’s jersey and says, “I’ve decided to become a Cardinals fan and this jersey is all I want for my birthday.” His sister is immediately embarrassed. Her voice chokes. The only thing she can say is “Go talk to mom.”

So the boy goes and finds his mom. “Mom?” he says. “I need to tell you something, but you need to promise me you won’t get mad at me.” His mom is caught off guard, uncertain of what might be on her

son's mind. Nevertheless, she assures him, "Honey, you can tell me anything." The son holds up the Cardinal's jersey and says, "Mom, I've decided that I am going to be a Cards fan and all I want for my birthday is this jersey!" The mom is dumbfounded. She breaks out in tears. "No! Not this!" She shrieks, and nearly faints. "Where have I gone wrong?" she cries. Grabbing her son by the shoulders, she looks him straight in the eyes and says, "Go and find your father."

By now the son is a little concerned, but he still goes and finds his dad. "Dad," he begins, "I need to tell you something. It's personal, and I hope you want get mad." "Son," the father replies, "You know you can tell me anything." The son takes a deep breath and says, "Good, because I've decided to be a Cardinal's fan and all I want for my birthday is this jersey!" He holds up the jersey with a big smile, but the father grabs it out of his hands. "WHAT? No son of mine is every going to be caught dead in that," he says, taking the jersey and ripping it to shreds.

A few minutes later, the family is back in the car. The son is quiet. The father says to him, "Son, I hope you learned something this afternoon." To which the son replies, "I sure did. I've only been a St. Louis fan for two hours and already I can't stand being around you Cub fans!"

Those of you who have always lived in St. Louis might not understand just what it means to the conversion experiences of those of us who have embraced the Cardinals in later life. When my grandparents moved to Chicago around 1908, their first apartment was on Sheffield Avenue across from Wrigley Field. Both of my parents were born and raised on the north side of Chicago, and my brother and sister used to take the bus on summer days to see the Cub's play. My family moved around the country a bit, finally settling in Los Angeles in

1972. At this stage of life, my father became an apostle for Tommy Lasorda and the Great Dodger in the Sky. After we moved to Ballwin, one of the first gifts anyone ever gave our family were tickets to a Cardinals game. On that day, the skies opened, a light encircled us, and we saw the Lord appear to us wearing a white robe with the birds on the bat.

Change is never easy.

It is perhaps the most familiar song we know, yet somehow its refrains are never easy to sing. From the moment we are born to the moment of our death, and even beyond death, our bodies are changing. Our minds grow and change. Jobs come and go. Our culture changes. Even our most favorite and easy to remember passwords change.

Think of the change we see: iPhones were first sold in 2007. Twenty five years ago the church I served got its first fax machine; thirty years ago, it took a vote of the Session of a church I served to purchase one computer (and it was not an unanimous vote). Our world has changed, and we are changing. As many have said, the future we planned on just a few years ago no longer exists—and suddenly we are thrust in a world of non-stop change.

But there is good news, and it comes from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Acts was written by Luke as a continuation of his gospel. It is the story of God's people coming to grips with change. It is the story of how Jesus' followers found their way in a changing world. It tells the story of how believers changed, and how they broadened their understanding of the way God was at work. Acts recounts the church's encounter with a pluralism and secularism -- and I believe that if we allow them, these stories can challenge us, as well.

Maybe even change us, because these stories are an invitation to transformation.¹

“Changing the way we go about life is not all that difficult,” writes Joan Chittister. “We all do it all the time. We change jobs, states, houses, relationships, lifestyles over and over again as the years go by. But those are, in the main, very superficial changes. Real change is far deeper than that. It is changing the way we look at life that is the stuff of conversion.”²

She continues: “What needs to be changed in us? Anything that makes us the sole center of ourselves. Anything that deludes us into thinking that we are not simply a work in progress, all of those degrees, status, achievements, and power are no substitute for the wisdom that a world full of God everywhere, in everyone, has to teach us.”

Chittister’s words prompt us to see conversion not as something to be feared but as a call to discover God’s gift of life transformed—changed from fear into faith, from hatred into love, and from isolation into community. These are the ways God’s people are changed in Acts, and it is the heart of what happened to Paul on the way to Damascus.

Much of this story challenges us – we uncomfortable with stories of mystical transformation in general, particularly conversion stories involving sudden apparitions of Jesus. Luke tells us that Saul, soon to be Paul, is knocked down, blinded, and called to a new purpose by Christ. Writer Flannery O’Connor once said that “I reckon the Lord knew the only way to make a Christian out of Paul was to knock him off his horse.”

Yet that’s just the beginning.

¹ See Bruce Epperly, “Transforming Acts: The Acts of the Apostles as a 21st Century Gospel.”

² See <http://www.joanchittister.org/word-from-joan/3-13-2017/what-needs-change-us>

Not only does Jesus appear to Paul, but he calls him into a life of ongoing change. This story is not about a single moment of conversion, but rather an invitation to experience God's gift of ongoing transformation. Paul's call is not to experience change on the sidelines, but to be fully immersed in the dynamic work of resurrection.

Jesus opens the doors of Paul's shuttered life. He calls him to move from breathing threats against the disciples to inhaling resurrection and the breath of the Spirit. He invites him to step toward love, and away from fear.

The change God brings about in Paul is more than a new title for his resume; it is a complete and utterly new way of being. Everything about who Paul is and how he understands the world has changed.

But note that Paul is not the only one changed.

Ananias also experiences a vision. He is also invited by Jesus to change – to move from fear into faith, from hatred into love, from isolation into dynamic community.

Ananias can't believe his ears. "Do what now? You want me to go face to face with Paul, the one who has pledged to execute all of your followers? Do you realize what you are asking?"

We might do well to change the name of this story from the conversion of Paul to the conversion of the church. Ananias is also called to rise, and to go see what God is doing. Ananias as well as Paul is called into a life of change.

Change is hard. Change, of any sort, demands that we learn new things and discover new possibilities. Change pushed Ananias out of his

comfort zone, just as Paul's conversion pulled him into a new way of living.

Yet both are used by God to extend the love of Jesus Christ to all persons-- not just a chosen few, not just the people we enjoy, nor even only to the people we know.

All people.

Change may knock us off our horse, or it may tap us on the shoulder. Either way, it invites us to see God at work in fresh and sometimes startling ways.

Luke tells us that the Apostles "performed many signs and wonders among the people." As I read that, I hear Luke reminding us that our call is to participate in God's ongoing work of transformation and change.

Rachel Held Evans, a brilliant Christian writer who tragically died yesterday at the age of 37, last year wrote that "perhaps most miraculous was the apostles' continued embrace of outsiders...(they) remember what many modern Christians tend to forget – that what makes the gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out but who it lets in." ³

And so Ananias he gets up and goes. He says, "Here I am Lord." And so Paul gets up from the ground, aware that the ground beneath his feet has changed. Soon they will meet, and soon will say, "Here I am, Lord, I will go and reach out to the new neighbor. Here I am Lord, I will offer your enthusiastic welcome to all. I will break down barriers. I will speak words of love, and not words of hate. I will be the change you seek to bring into this world.

Amen.

³ Rachel Held Evans, "Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Loving the Bible," p. 186.