

“Coming to Faith”

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We have already heard excellent sermons from our confirmands, which is disappointing because I wrote a chapter of my dissertation on this text, and I threatened my wife I would read it to you. It's about 25 pages and it would take a while. But I would like to share some of the things I encountered as I studied this passage with my thesis advisor who was Robert Boyd Munger, chair of Evangelism in our seminary. He looked at this passage and he, having been an evangelist in Africa, was interested in considering what it meant to come to faith. He looked at this passage and also compared it to others in Mark.

This story of Paul is an unusual one. It is a dramatic change. We had Paul who was persecuting the Church. In his zeal he was going out of his way - he was traveling to other cities to find people who were following Jesus, and find them and arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem to put an end to this heresy. As he was traveling to do this work with a couple of compatriots he was struck blind. In a flash of light he fell to the ground and he could no longer see. He heard the voice of Jesus.

This is, as I said, an unusual story. It is an example of a transformation, a conversion to faith in a moment, in an instant. We refer to it as a pointillier conversion, a point in a moment. It is a type of conversion that was celebrated throughout American Christianity, in particular. You may be or may not be familiar with the Great Awakening in America; the revivals and the remarkable number of people who came to faith through tent meetings and listening to evangelists. These experiences were similar to Paul's experience. In Paul's experience he had something happen to him that was so powerful he could not believe anything other than what just happened to him.

When I was talking to the confirmands this year, some of them talked to me about the question of the evidence for our faith. I described to them that God has not declared God's presence in our world in a way that it makes it irrefutably true that God is present. It is a reasonable question. Why, why hasn't God done this as he did for Paul? For Paul, he struck him to the ground, made him blind, and sent someone to heal him. There is little that he could have done other than to believe that Jesus was the resurrected Lord.

But for others of us that is not our experience. When I was talking to one of the confirmands about this, I described my own struggle with this question and I leaned back to C. S. Lewis, a writer before my time, but a popular writer in Christianity, who answered difficult questions like this. C. S. Lewis' answer was that we were created to be in fellowship with God.

We were created to be people capable of saying yes or no to God and, in order to do that, God could not have declared himself absolutely. If God were to declare without any doubt, then faith would not be faith; everyone would have no choice but to believe and follow this One who was there before us. But God has chosen to give us freewill, to give us the opportunity to respond or not to respond.

For Paul, he was not given that choice to believe or not to believe in the presence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he did have the choice to decide what to do with that knowledge. He decided that he would respond to it, that he would go out, that he would turn and follow and be transformed. So he went and he was transformed into the Apostle Paul who went and started churches and wrote some of the most significant theology in the New Testament.

Now the question would be for those of us who grew up in the Church, for those of us who experience faith as something that either we always knew or something that we slowly came to understand: How can we relate to Paul's story? Is our faith less valid? I expect you have encountered folks who favor or value a statement of a conversion experience – a pointillier conversion experience.

My professor Richard Geese, asked that question and looked to the Disciples' experience. The disciples in the Gospel of Mark did not have a pointillier experience of conversion. Sure, they had moments when Jesus met them and called them, but they were far from understanding at the beginning. They had a process of slowly growing to understand that might seem familiar to you, if you consider what it means to grow up and learn about our faith.

To give you an example, to help set this, I will describe to you what it has been like raising my kids; not about faith, but about a fact of our family. We adopted my daughter shortly after she was born and as my kids have grown we have explained this story to them. But we have had to tell it, and retell it, and retell it. They would get confused about details as they moved from two and three and four years old. They were confused as to who was her biological mother and we would explain that. As they have grown, we have had to re-teach the story because *they* have changed. Their capacity to understand has changed and what we told them initially made sense to them when they were two and three and four. But as they have grown, new questions have come about. New abilities to wrestle, new ideas and concerns have come, and we have had to retell and explain to them, what it is that it meant that our daughter was adopted into our family.

So, too, for those of us who have grown up in the Church, we understood, as you heard in the two personal statements of faith today that you come to church to get donuts. We would like to make clear to those of you who serve donuts to the church - Do you realize how important that ministry is to our Christian Education process? [laughter] It is almost universally powerful in the lives of our children, but they grew in this development, they understood this initial question of God loves them, Jesus loves them. Then it grew into something more, as they were capable of understanding and they were capable of wrestling. By the time they got to Confirmation, some of these students have wrestled and questioned and some of them have turned from a lack of faith, to a faith in the midst of this journey of confirmation. They have wrestled with questions about, "Is God here?" "What does it mean that we can go and be with people of other faiths?" and "How do we relate to them?" They have wrestled with this.

The Disciples went through a process of slowly understanding who Jesus was. If you read through the Gospel of Mark, you hear that they first understand that Jesus is a teacher. They appreciate his teachings as a rabbi. Then they understand him as a prophet; someone who can command the wind and the waves and raise a little girl from death. Finally they

understand him as the Messiah – as the One sent by God. But their idea of a Messiah is very different than who Jesus is. So they next came to understand that Jesus is the Son of Man and that he is one who is going to suffer and die. They learn that discipleship means denying one's self. Then they come to understand that he is a son of David, as Jesus enters into Jerusalem and is proclaimed as a king. Finally they understand him as the Son of God in his Resurrection and in his seating at the right hand of God the Father. For the Disciples, they didn't get it right the first year. It took three years plus for them to come to understand who Jesus was – and they were walking and eating with Jesus.

So, too, for many of us, our life of faith is process of discovery. It's a process of questioning. It is a process where God works with us, sometimes in powerful moments of the presence of God, or experiences of God's love to others, or a setting – sometimes in quiet contemplation, or wrestling with new ideas that give us promise. God calls us; God invites us to faith. For some it happens in a moment, for others it is a slow process but through this God brings us, invites us, woos us; ever-calling us to enter into that relationship for which we were created – a relationship to know and follow the Creator of all things: the one who knows us and loves us more than we can understand. Amen.