

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Converting”
The Resurrection Community, series.
6th Sunday of Easter
Acts 9:1-9
May 1, 2016

As some of you know, I spent my college summers in Mexico working with youth groups from the US, helping to facilitate various mission trips. The thing about working with teenagers who spent all day working in the sun doing some exhausting work is... they like you more if you'd let them sleep in.

But that wasn't an option.

One year, one of my responsibilities was to get them all up and out of their rooms before breakfast, to gather at a fountain to pray for the day. The first day of their week, most of them made it no problem. By the end of the week, it always took a little more creativity on my part.

So, I had this bullhorn.

I'd take it in my hand, and climb up on the lip of the fountain, and like a street preacher calling people to walk the aisle, I'd start preaching: **“If you're at the fountain right now, you are right,”** I'd say. **“But if you're not at the fountain right now, you are wrong! Come make yourself right!”**

I got some groggy sneers while yelling into my bullhorn. As far as they were concerned, I was no better than Saul, breathing murderous threats and rounding them up. But it worked. Shoot, I had a better response record than Billy Graham! One way or another, whether they liked it or not, I'd get everybody “made right” before the day even started.

Saul's tactics were maybe a little more terrifying than a 21 year old yelling at you through a bullhorn at 7:00 in the morning, but he's basically trying to do the same thing. He's out to make all those wrong people turn right... or at least to get them to stop spreading their wrong ideas.

Remember, **Saul is a brilliant religious leader** in his day, and he's absolutely sure he's doing God's business. That's what his crusade is all about. He's not out there rounding up the followers of Jesus just because he's a bad guy.

Saul is a leader of God's people. He's a Hebrew of Hebrews, from the tribe of Benjamin. He's a devout, sincere, religious leader... and he's on a mission from God.

He's got a divine obligation, here.

...or so he thinks.

As far as Saul is concerned, he is **“doing the Lord's business,”** ...just like so

many churches and so many Christians are “doing the Lord’s business” by defending the purity of God’s people,

by defending the boundaries of orthodoxy,
by defending the great tradition of our faith,
by making all those “wrong” people “right.”

Saul *thinks* he’s doing the God’s business,
until the God shows up and knocks him off his high horse.

And what he encounters there is absolutely confusing for Saul. It doesn’t make any sense. It doesn’t fit the categories of what God’s has shown God’s people in the past.

***But this is how God is.
This is how God works.***

If there’s one thing that is consistent about the story of the bible and one thing consistent about the story of the Church, it’s that God is always knocking us off our high horse,

and completely confounding us...
acting in ways we could not expect,
showing up in people we do not expect,
and breaking our categories we thought God created of what to expect.

It happens throughout the scriptures, and it starts happening in new and profound ways in the book of Acts... like in chapter 1 when the disciples ask the Resurrected Christ if now is the time that Israel will be restored, and ***instead of sending them swords, Jesus sends them the Holy Spirit.***

And it happens to Peter when he sees an unclean Roman Gentile named Cornelius and his family is suddenly filled with that same Spirit and start speaking in tongues.

And it’s been happening in the church ever since. God keeps knocking us off our high horse and breaking our sacred categories... the very categories and boundaries we thought were God ordained to begin with.

In fact, it’s so prevalent and so consistent that it should be a clear sign to us. **“If the voice of God you hear always agrees with you... chances are, it’s not God!”** (Tracey Blackman).

Saul is suddenly hearing a very different voice.
And this voice knocks him to the ground in confusion.
“Who are you?” he asks. And he’s left blind. He has to be lead by the hand.
And his healing will come from a man named Ananias, a follower of Jesus.

In other words, the one who knows so much,
becomes the one who knows nothing,

The one who is powerful,
 is humbled to child-likeness,
The one leading the charge,
 is now led by the hand.
The one who set out to destroy,
 now has to be healed by the very ones he despised.
This is the great humiliation, but it's this humbling, this lowering, that is the path
of Saul's salvation... and to ours.

"If you're not at the fountain right now, you are wrong!" I'd shout, standing
up on the lip of the fountain. **"Come make yourself, right."** In other words, **"If you're
not where I am standing, your wrong!"** It's exactly what we in the church are so often
yelling out to the world.

But what if... we are wrong too?

Or what if our whole framework of right and wrong is a misleading framework to
begin with.

What if God's whole framework is all together different? What if God's "thoughts
are higher than our thoughts," as it says in Isaiah, and from God's perspective none of us
are "right" and "wrong." We're all just hungry people, barely awake, who need to be fed?

And if that's the case, then maybe what God really wants, is not for the rest of
them to get to **our** fountain, but for us to climb down off our perch and realize that we're
half asleep too.

And instead of trying to get everyone to the fountain, to make everyone "right,"
what we really just need is to walk **with them...** to the breakfast table... where we can all
be filled with nourishment for the day... where we can all encounter the Divine Presence
together.

That just might be an all together better framework for conversion.

Conversion is happening all over the book of Acts. It's happening in all kinds of
people... people like Saul, whose story is sandwiched between the Ethiopian Eunuch on
one Side, and Cornelius on the other.

Conversion is happening **in individuals** and it's happening **in the Resurrection
Community**. I grew up thinking that Acts was mostly the story of the church converting
people. But the more I study it, the more I'm beginning to see that it is just as much the
story of the early followers of Jesus, the early church being converted itself by what God
is doing in and through people.

And as you read the stories, you start to realize that these conversion moment and
stories aren't primarily rooted in being "right" or "wrong", they aren't about getting your
theological ducks in a row. They aren't about having all the right answers, or better text-
book knowledge of God.

Yes, it almost always involves a shift in perspective, but conversion in these stories, are mostly about waking up to what God is doing in the world, and joining God in that work.

It's not about me,
or about "being right"
or joining "right group."

That **me-centric** idea of conversion is mostly egoism run wild.

Conversion is always **God centric**.

It is this continual process of turning toward God who is our center. It's aim, it's end game, is not primarily being "right." It's a deeper and deeper participation within the life of God.

And so of course,
the Resurrection Community is a ***place*** of conversion,
where conversion is happening.
And a community that is, itself, being converted all along the way.

And like Saul, that conversion often involves a humbling of the community,
and a recognition of our blindness...
and a new willingness to be taken by the hand and lead into uncomfortable and unfamiliar places.

It's not something that happens often or easy for us, but it is always needed... It's needed for us all. And like Saul, it happens when somewhere along the way, we encounter the Divine Presence.

This is the heart of mysticism... and why I deeply agree with what Kate said in class last week: "Ultimately, we should all be mystics."

I heard an interview with Richard Rohr this week where he said that to be mystic is to have ***Experiential Knowledge of God***... versus, say, a text book knowledge of God where you're just trying to get all the right answers, or even a biblical knowledge of God, where you can quote ever chapter and verse.

Yes, those things are good, but it's really only been the last 500 years, since the Enlightenment, with it's emphasis on ration and reason, that we've made the head central to our faith. And this has really only happened in the West. And so it's only the last 500 years that we in the Western Christendom have make the focus of Christianity text book knowledge.

And so the Christianity we've been raised in tends to be very rational, intelligent, systematic, and appealing to the intellect. What defined a good Christian has primarily been someone who could quote the bible,
or give a good theological lecture,
or argue their point of view and win...

rather than primarily someone whose life exudes the fruits of the spirit,
someone who is becoming more Christ-like.
someone who is participating in the Divine Life.

I'm not saying theology isn't important, or that textbook knowledge doesn't matter, but I am saying it's still one or two steps removed from Experiential Knowledge... and it rarely creates real conversion.

When textbook knowledge of God is primary for us, it doesn't foster loving people, it tends to create angry people who want to argue with you, and make you like them. And it doesn't really matter whether they are people on the Right or people on the Left... *they tend to be just like Saul.*

But Experiential Knowledge of God (Knowledge of God that's born out of a Divine Encounter) leads people to embrace mystery,
and paradox,
and opens them up to seeing God in the other...
and more often will lead them to deeper conversion...
to deeper participation in the life of God.

And so **Saul, the persecutor** of anyone who was different, becomes **Paul the Mystic**... the one who advocates for inclusion of Gentiles,
the one who sees and describes a great unity in all humanity... who says "**in Christ, the dividing walls have been destroyed.**" From the great divisions in our world, God has made one people. Ephesians 2.¹

who says "**I become all things to all people,**"² instead of still trying to make all people to become like him, 1 Cor. 9.

who says, "**I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.**" Galatians 2³ ...It's divine participation,
and then he calls the church to live by the Spirit instead of the Law,
and first describes the fruit of the spirit, the fruits of Christ-living-in-us in Galatians 5.

and he becomes the one who has let go of the need to be perfect any more. "**I count it all as rubbish,**" he writes, "**compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.**" Philippians 3.⁴

¹ Ephesians 2:14-18

² 1 Corinthians 9:22-23

³ Galatians 2:20

⁴ Philippians 3:4-8

Saul the persecutor, the defender of right and wrong,
has this new Experiential Knowledge of God,
and becomes Paul the mystic.

This is what conversion looks like. This is how you can recognized truly
converted people.

It's a deeper and deeper participation in the life of God.

It's a growing trust of mystery.

It's a profound humbling

where you no longer need to be correct.

Your deepest desire is to be connected.

And Dayspring, this is what conversion looks like in the **Resurrection
Community**... a community not obsessed with boundaries, with ridged lines of purity, or
ridged lines of orthodoxy...

But instead a community humble and open that can embrace mystery,

a community that knows is better to be drawn than to be driven.

It's better to be led by the hand, than to always lead the charge.

It's a community whose blindness is gradually healed by those who are different,
a community being formed in the fruits of the spirit,

a community whose deepest desire is not to be correct,

but to be connected.

Prayer:

And so God, we pray, that you would open us up to your presence... even now.

*As we prepare for the gifts of this table, we confess to you that we have often been blind,
and we're not even sure where our blindness is, and that most of the time we are driven
by our agendas,*

rather than drawn into your love.

And so we come, as brothers and sisters, in community with one another,

we come as part of humanity, in community with the world,

we come with our individual questions and struggles,

but we come ready to receive your Divine Mystery deep into our being.

Grant us the grace to encounter you here.

We ask this in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father....