

**WHATEVER WE NEED: TO SERVE; ACTS 9:1-6 (7-20); APRIL 18, 2010;
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I was in New York this past week attending several events organized and sponsored by Auburn Theological Seminary – each designed to display Auburn’s mission on the occasion of inaugurating a new president, Katharine Henderson.

Late Thursday afternoon in the studios of WNYC we heard an interfaith panel address the topic of public intellectuals and the media.

There was a young Muslim woman who wrote, *What’s Wrong with Islam* that catapulted her to notoriety as a ‘go-to’ person for events in the Muslim world; a rabbi *Newsweek* says in one of the top ten rabbis in America who hit the scene after 9-11 when he said, “I’m done with that God in the sky.” And there was a Christian African American political scientist who rose to popularity during the Obama campaign interpreting for many news outlets the significance of electing of our first black president.

I mention these people because they each have an unusual capacity to communicate complex subjects to wide audiences.

And this is precisely what the Apostle Paul possessed. The ability to translate ‘the religion of Jesus’ into ‘the religion about Jesus’ at a time when no one but a handful of Jewish followers even heard of the itinerant preacher from Nazareth.

Paul wasn’t living in a sound-bite culture but he was living in a world, like ours, that was politically volatile and teeming with religious movements. Without his talent for communication and unswerving commitment many wonder whether there would even be a Christian church today. Certainly Jesus seems to have had no idea or plan for institutionalizing his principles into a world religion.

To further thicken the plot, it is curious that this Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus (who became the Apostle Paul) would become the primary leader and visionary of the church.

As we heard in the story today, Saul was a persecutor of Christians. He made it his business to stamp out the fledgling Jesus movement whenever and wherever he could. He had a special arrangement with the authorities which granted him permission to use force when necessary to break-up and disperse their gatherings.

He gave his approval to and ‘held the coats’ as Fred Buechner says, of the thugs who stoned Stephen – the first Christian martyr-to death. In other words, Saul was the number one enemy of Jesus and his followers.

Therefore, his story is of huge significance to us, if for no other reason, than what we know and practice as Christianity is largely his invention.

His letters were the first and earliest documents of Jesus’ teachings and their implications for daily living. The Gospels, the biographies of Jesus, came later.

There’s a lot we could explore on the topic of Paul today but what I’d like for us to consider is that fascinating shift he made from persecutor to leader of the church.

This is of interest because it's a shift that many of us make. Not from being persecutors of the church to leaders but from one way of life to another; and sometimes the change we make, like Paul's can be from something we oppose to something we support.

I'm not talking about switching political parties or working for one company then its competitor. Rather, what Paul says happened to him on the road to Damascus and what I think is of relevance for us today is this process of transformation that we do not control or dictate but that God initiates and directs.

I mentioned this last week talking about Thomas. I said we tend to think of ourselves as products of our own creation. I am who I make myself to be. But not only is that an oversimplification of how we grow and develop – because I think circumstances and other people play a much larger role than we often recognize. But when it comes to our spiritual identity, our sense of purpose and self-worth we are not just self-made men and women but people shaped by a power beyond our own intelligence and capacity.

Krister Stendahl the great New Testament scholar and former dean of Harvard Divinity School puts it succinctly when he says most of us think of Paul's conversion the way Luther depicted it; we think of Saul as a man in search of something, a person who finally finds what he is looking for on the road to Damascus.

But Stendahl notes that nothing in the story says that Paul was searching for anything – except more Christians to persecute.

This is not the story (as Luther conceived it) of a man who was miserable and tormented until he finds a gracious God but rather a story of someone, who quite without warning, is encountered by the living Christ. To read the story any other way, says Stendahl, is to impose a modern bias.

And, indeed, what other twist would we give lines that say, “as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?’”

I think Stendahl is on to something. Invariably I was taught this story of Paul's conversion with psychological explanations. And that may be the greatest heresy of our time – to reduce everything to a psychological problem with a therapeutic answer: sin, aberrant behavior, or spiritually restored living.

There are millions whose lives have been turned around from knocking on death's door to abundant living; from reckless behavior to inspired service and principled action. If you asked them they'd tell you the reason for their turn-around was a power bigger than themselves and something called the sixth step which says simply, ‘was entirely ready to have God remove my defects of character.’ And there are legions of others who never heard of a sixth step and prayed for and were given new lives.

Ready to have *God* remove my defects of character. Not ‘me’ because I'm part of the problem. Paul thought he was doing a great service. Something bigger than him had to intervene, remove his bigotry and bias, soften him up, allow him to use his gifts for God.

My hunch is the same could be said at one time or another for most of us.

Most of us need something bigger than us to turn us in the right direction.

I don't know about you, but Paul's story gives me pause. It helps me replace the Enlightenment version of humanity as my spiritual compass and replace it with a biblical version of human growth and development.

We are who God calls and chooses and equips us to become. I've seen leaders of our congregation resist or question or turn down a particular role or mission project then somehow get out of their own way and become part of something new.

More than a few of you have told me your own 'road to Damascus' stories – stories I suspect you haven't shared widely because they don't fit into our rational, need-to-explain-everything view of the world. But you've told me your story because you've needed to tell it. It was life transforming, overpowering, redirecting and you are a different person because something, let's call it God, intervened in your life.

If you scratch beneath the surface of the bios of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Thomas Merton or Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. you find in their own words some tale like Paul's; slowly or in some cases all at once they changed from being one kind of person with one set of values and behaviors and then became someone else, someone else they liked better, someone more deeply fulfilled.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses or any of the prophets – reluctant followers, not wanting to be anyone's mouthpiece let alone God's – each of them coming before some burning bush or Pharaoh or arch enemy, often demurring or even running in the other direction then willingly or unwillingly having their lives turned around.

Or the disciples themselves before and post Easter. From wimpy, frightened and scattered to emboldened, risk-taking and organized.

Paul's conversion here in Easter is important because though we celebrated resurrection a couple of weeks ago there may be more than a few of us here today who have yet to 'get it' or 'feel it' or experience what it means for our own lives.

Sometimes like him we're engaged in a way of life, a career or a family situation or a health diagnosis or a parenting challenge. We may believe with conviction we're doing the right thing, on the right path. But, in fact, it's not only killing us, it's hurting other people as well.

Then some course of events begins to turn things around despite our best efforts to prevent it.

The good news of Easter is this: we're not in control of every move, every moment of our lives. That's an illusion. That view of life and destiny is a very slick marketing ploy. Rather, if we follow the rabbi/carpenter we've already opened ourselves to a force for change we cannot control that will intervene somewhere when we least expect it.

My goal today is to get that on our radar. To make us aware of the possibility that we could find ourselves on the way to work or anywhere getting ourselves knocked off our horse and redirected in some path of service and use to God.

It's disconcerting to worship a God who can and does operate that way. Scary if we hold on to the notion that anything that happens in my life needs my personal

endorsement. But it's comforting, too, to know that something bigger than me, can save me from myself.

Irshad Manji, that Muslim woman who wrote *What's Wrong With Islam Today* was a nerdy, cloistered Columbia University assistant professor just a few years ago; then the repression and protest movement in Iran thrust her to center stage;

Rabbi Kula, one of America's ten best, was standing at ground zero shortly after the attack and a television crew approached him and asked what sense he made of the loss and destruction to which he blurted out his response, "After this, I'm done with that God in the sky."

And Melissa Harris-Lacewell, the brilliant political scientist whose life was dedicated to publish or perish and footnoting her way through every word she wrote or uttered, got a call one day at her University of Chicago office and was asked to go to bat for the candidate during the Reverend Wright crisis that led to Candidate Obama's defining moment speech on race.

There is at work within us and around us a force, an energy that is bigger and beyond us but works with and in and through us.

Actually, if you're game, life becomes a kind of adventure when you know that at any time the Holy One of Israel, the Risen Christ, Allah or whatever name we give to that mystery and power can intervene.

So be patient, keep watch, prepare ye the way of the Lord. Amen.