



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
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A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to

Text: Acts 9:1-9

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Have you ever noticed how often we use the word *funny* and how often it ends up meaning very different things?

For example, sometimes we use the word funny to mean humorous. A funny person is a person who enjoys laughing and making other people laugh. I love funny things and even attempt, on occasion, to be funny. Humor is important to me.

But we use the word funny in other ways.

If a person gets up in the morning and says, “My stomach feels funny,” they are not saying that their stomach is now starting a new career in stand up. It means that they are not feeling well.

If we say that we’d feel funny about doing something it means that we’d feel awkward about something which we are undertaking.

And if we say something funny happened on our way to someplace, well, it can either be that we had an entertaining event or something completely unexpected took place.

And then there was Saul. A funny thing happened on the way to Damascus and it wasn’t amusing.

Saul, the one we’ve come to know as St. Paul, was persecuting Christians. He was building up a case and was on his way to Damascus when a funny thing happened. Luke tells us that a light appeared and a voice came down from Heaven and asked Saul why he was persecuting me. And Saul wants to know who ‘me’ is. And Saul encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus. And Saul turns from being a persecutor of Christians to the person who is most important in the history of Christianity of anyone other than Jesus.

For many, this story is troubling and difficult. I say this for two reasons.

First there is the issue of Paul himself.

When we think of St. Paul we think of the great Christian. When the people Paul was first interacting with thought of him, they thought of him as this horrible person who was persecuting everyone in the early church. And they were correct. This is who he was.

And so there was the question. Why did God use this bad man for such a noble purpose? Or maybe better asked is wondering why God doesn't use better people than Paul.

In many ways, this story is a definitive narrative about the grace of God.

Too often we have a way too narrow perspective on grace and salvation. Grace is often viewed as at 'get out of hell free' card. Salvation is often merely viewed as dying and going to Heaven. Grace and salvation are rightly intertwined, but often not seen as fully as we ought to view them.

Grace is usually defined as a free gift from God. This is true. But grace is often seen as a free gift from God, given to us, and for us. Grace is less about us and more about God. Grace is not some cheap thing, it is not a 'get out of hell free card,' because God is nice, but because God desires that we love Him and serve Him. God's grace is shared so that God's great love is shared.

Saul becomes Paul not because Saul is a great guy. St. Paul does not become a central figure in the history of Christianity because of that fact that he's wonderful and smart. He does become wonderful and he's truly brilliant, but what is special about Paul is God. God chose Paul and it was God's choice of Paul that made Paul so special.

Grace and salvation come to us when we seek them and they come to us not just to die, but to live.

Grace and salvation are gifts from God that enable us to see, to hear, to love, and to be loved by God. Grace and salvation break us from the bondage of sin, of death, often of the lives we lead to free us to serve God more fully.

Saul becomes Paul and what made him great was his openness and willingness to listen to Jesus and embrace the grace God was giving him. The story becomes so significant because it shows us that God can use the most wretched sinner in the midst for good; and that ability to transform the most wretched among us into someone and something good comes via the gift of grace.

Secondly, there is the issue of conversion. This narrative is rightly called the conversion of Paul.

If you have a great understanding of conversion, you're a far better person than I am. Conversion is, in Christianity, not all that simple.

Classic, very traditional Christian theology says that by Jesus' death on the cross everyone

is redeemed; but to achieve that redemption one must consent to it. Coming to that consent is by way of conversion.

However, what people believe about conversion is pretty varied.

Classically, there are two types of conversions. One is like the conversion of Paul, knocked down, see Jesus, and follow him.

On the other hand there are people who have been Christians their entire life and many will say that they don't recall a particular conversion experience.

I was Baptized, I went to church growing up, was Confirmed, and went to seminary and don't recall a time when I wasn't a Christian. I can't recall, in my own life, a conversion experience.

Within our United Church of Christ traditions, within the Puritan churches of the 17th century, there was a rule that you could not be a member of the church until you had a conversion experience. If you're wondering about Puritan ecstatic experiences, considering we often wonder if they had pulses, their idea of conversion was more of an intellectual 'change' in one's heart and mind. The problem arose, however, in the fact that people grew up in church, didn't know a time when God wasn't a part of their lives, and these conversion experiences stopped happening and the Puritans changed their rules.

Something I take from the conversion of St. Paul is this. He had a sudden conversion experience and I know that people do. I also know that there are people who never do not know Christ. We all sit side by side.

To me, however, in my life, conversion is something ongoing. It's a lot like love.

Many people fall in love. Some people fall in love and are thunderstruck. "Love at first sight" is real. On the other hand, sometimes people are friends and the friendship grows and they realize that they've always loved each other.

But falling in love is not what sustains relationships. Lots of people break up with people with whom they have fallen in love. Falling in love does not sustain a relationship, but growing in love does. Spending each day, growing in some way, together, fosters love.

I think that the same thing is true of conversion. When we read about St. Paul we don't stop reading about him with this story. His conversion, when he gets knocked down happens in an instant. But it doesn't stop. The conversion continues.

If you read his letters in chronological order, not Biblical order as they are placed in the Bible by length, but in chronological order, by date, you'll find that Paul changed and grew in his faith. His conversion to Christianity was sudden and instant, but his growth in faith took place over years.

That growth in faith is something we are all called to do. Walking in faith is not supposed to be easy. Walking in faith is not supposed to be a walk through the spring rain. Walking in faith is sometimes difficult and painful. Conversion is about walking in faith and that conversion is something that happens each morning when we open our eyes. We are given a new opportunity to grow in faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

A funny thing happened to Saul on the way to Damascus. He was on his way to persecute Christians, and he ended up walking with Jesus.

It is a story of grace, of redemption, of conversion, and ultimately of the kind of growth we are all invited to share.