

THE RECOGNITION FACTOR

Sermon, April 10, 2016

Text: Acts 9:1-20

Today's reading from Acts is probably the most famous conversion story in history ... the conversion of Saul, the Jewish Pharisee, to Christianity ... Saul, of course, who is better known as Paul. That word "conversion" tends to make people uncomfortable these days. Some believe that calling for "conversion" is narrow minded, bigoted and even primitive; to try and get someone to convert to your religion is just wrong and narrow. I'm sure you've heard people say, *"It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe it with all your heart. Sincerity is what matters."* I almost want to apologize for being blunt (*I won't*), but let me say as gently, yet firmly, as I can ... do we realize how silly that is? Saul was an intensely religious and moral man. He kept the law flawlessly. He was filled with faith; he was very religious. Saul sincerely believed something with all his heart, but he was wrong ... and it was killing a whole lot of people around him! (*It was tearing him apart as well; we'll look into that at another time.*) Think of two ice skaters. One goes out on a half an inch of ice and confidently says, *"I know it will hold me up."* The other goes out on four inches of ice and timidly says, *"Oh I don't know, I'm afraid. I'm scared; I hope it'll hold me up."* One skater drowns, one skater lives. Who drowned? The one with a lot of faith! The one who lived is the one with little faith. Why? Because it is not the faith that saves you, it is the ice! It's not the quality or quantity or even the sincerity of your faith that matters; what really matters is what your faith is IN.

The Pharisee Saul was so intent on being right that he thought nothing of imprisoning Christians (*and thereby sending them, for the most part, to their deaths*) ... he was intensely religious, totally in line with what he perceived to be biblical authority, zealous for his faith, intent on setting other misguided people straight by threats and force if necessary (*Acts 9:1 "Saul was breathing out murderous threats towards the Lord's disciples."*). However, he apparently had no compassion for those with whom he differed. AFTER his conversion, though, he was no longer murderous. AFTER his conversion, he never used the threat of power and/or coercion. AFTER his conversion, he always and consistently sought to persuade people in love and compassion. AFTER his conversion, he was hugely successful in reconciling with others, bringing life and joy and light into the life of others, and he arguably went on to become one of THE most civilizing influences in the history of our planet! We never see the converted Paul using the threat of punishment, imprisonment, execution, intimidation, etc. that the Pharisee Saul so readily resorted to. Again, it matters what ... or Who ... your faith is in!

Our pew Bibles subtitle this account as "Saul's Conversion." In part due to the (*unjustified*) contemporary squeamishness about that word, perhaps this might be better subtitled "Saul's Re-cognition." Think for a moment about the word, *Recognition*. Recognition involves a re – cognition. Re-cognition is a re-*cognating*, a re-thinking, in light of the comprehended reality. Just for a really simple example: I went to Women and Infants Hospital yesterday to visit Corrie Majeika, who gave birth to her fourth child (Catherine Grace) early that morning. I asked at the front desk which room she was in, took the elevator to the fifth floor, knocked on the door of the room I was directed to (room 5118), heard a voice from within call out, "Come in!", I went in to Room 5118, and at once recognized the couple with a newborn in that room were *not* the Majeikas! Obviously, this comprehended reality caused me to re-cognate, re-think, how I planned to address the occupant(s) of that room ... I said, *"Oh, excuse me! I'm sorry; I am in the wrong room. But congratulations!"* I then learned from a nurse on duty the Majeikas were in room 5110. Again, I knocked on the door, a cheery voice said, *"Come on in!"*, I opened the door and saw the privacy curtain was drawn shut. So I called out, *"Is it OK to come in?"* This time, another "recognition factor" came into play, because Corrie *recognized* my voice ... and replied, *"Oh, wait a minute!"* I think she was nursing Catherine and had thought the knock was from a nurse; the comprehended reality of my voice caused her to re-cognate, or re-*spond*, differently. Well, when Saul recognized Jesus, it caused him to re-cognate everything; it caused him to "see" everything ... EVERYTHING ... differently.

A little background: Saul was from Tarsus. Tarsus was not a Jewish town; it was in Asia Minor, which means that Saul the Jew most likely grew up around non-Jews. It seems Saul responded to the challenges of being in a religious minority by taking his faith very seriously. His credentials as an observant Jew were impeccable (see Philippians 3:4-6). The great threat to Jewish orthodoxy at the time was this new sect called "The Way." The founder of this Jewish sect had been crucified, but his followers were claiming he rose from the dead. Thousands of Jews had become followers of this Jesus and joined the new organization called the "church." Saul was determined to help put a stop to it. Acts 8:3 tells us, *"Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."* And now he is on his way to Damascus to hunt down more of them. Along the way to set straight these religious heretics, Saul was blinded by light. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, *"Saul, Saul. Why do you persecute me?"* By the way, don't let this slip by unnoticed; there is an important two-fold principle here in what Saul heard which helped initiate the process of his re-cognition, his conversion.

First, any act of persecution of Christians, any act of violence or degradation against a follower of Jesus, even any mistreatment or rudeness toward a fellow Christian, is an act against Jesus Himself! In other words, our Lord takes such things personally! Second (*and this will take a little more explaining*) there's something in this statement that only a truly

converted person will understand and appreciate. Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher in nineteenth century England, used a story in one of his sermons that his contemporaries knew; all his hearers knew this story as it was very much in the news at the time ... a true story about a man and his wife who lived in a remote part of Britain and were such nasty and even vicious people that when they had a baby boy, relatives came and gave this disreputable couple a sum of money and had the baby sent away to be adopted and raised by a decent family. In the subsequent months and years the parents continued to descend into squalor and depravity; eventually the father became, in the vernacular of the time, a highwayman ... basically a mugger. He would hide along deserted stretches of road and would mug and rob people who traveled these streets. One evening, as it was getting dark, he saw an obviously well-to-do, rich-looking young man coming down the road. He was particularly mad that day at rich people; in his mind he blamed "rich people" for all of his problems, and so he fell on this one with particular violence. He killed him. You may have guessed this, but do you know who the victim was? It was his son ... his son, who had learned about his father, and after he made a lot of money as an ambitious and disciplined and brilliant young man, had decided he was going to go back to the town of his birth to try to find his father, give him money, and appeal to him to reform his life. It was only after his arrest that the father fully *recognized* what he had done. Knowing that he killed his own son *got* to this man, and finally broke through to him the depravity of his way of life and the severity of his crimes. Here's the point: The father may have thought he was just breaking the law, but he now recognized he was actually killing his redeemer. A truly converted Christian is somebody who understands our sinful actions are not just breaking the law, we're not just disobeying rules; our sins have killed our redeemer. We start to see all our disobedience and all our stubbornness and all our fighting is really, at root, against Him. *"Why are you persecuting Me? I died for you, why do you persist in living for yourself?"*

At this point, Paul then stumbles along the road blinded, still not comprehending what all of this will mean for him. More than a vision is needed for a complete conversion, a complete re-cognition. It takes so much more than a one-time "Come to Jesus" moment to effect real and long lasting change and re-cognition. Paul needs some help. Paul needs some help putting this vision to practical work and understanding what it all means. And so he stumbles his way to Damascus, and we are told that for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. Meanwhile, another vision is taking place nearby. We are told Jesus appears to a disciple named Ananias and tells him to go to Saul who has now arrived in the city, and is staying at a place on Straight Street, and pray for him. Ananias was one of those in Damascus hiding from Saul, and Jesus tells him to go to Straight Street to help straighten Paul out. *(I just love the Bible's little ironies: Saul went to set the Christians straight, but he's the one who gets set straight on Straight Street. This could be a street name from my home town. My children were always amused that my parents lived not far from a main thoroughfare called Street Road, Rt. 926. We don't have a Straight Street in my home town, but we do have the main thoroughfare through the center of town called Gay Street ... named long before that word's meaning was more or less hijacked in today's vernacular. West Chester also has a main thoroughfare through the center of town called High Street. It's an old joke, but literally true, that in my home town just about everyone comes in High and goes out Gay.)*

Here we see another man re-cognizing Jesus, which causes him to re-cognate accordingly. Ananias goes. He re-cognates; his fearful hatred of a perceived enemy turns into a compassionate graciousness for a man in need of mercy in the name of Jesus. In one of the finest moments of the book of Acts, if not the entire Bible, Ananias goes to his persecutor Saul, places his hands on him, and the very first words Saul hears from the church he tried to destroy, are *"Brother Saul."* We read that something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. Before long he goes out and begins proclaiming the very truth that three days earlier he had been journeying to Damascus to stamp out ... Jesus *is* the Son of God, He *is* the Messiah. Once he re-cognized Jesus, he would go on to re-cognize Him as the One Who has been the center of his faith all along. *(The following was edited out for time, but I'll include it here in this manuscript: "And as it turns out, Jesus had great use for a feisty, over-educated Pharisee who grew up with Gentiles. This was the perfect resume for one whose mission was to take the name of Christ into the non-Jewish world. Without his background in Tarsus, Saul would never have understood the Gentiles to whom he introduced Jesus Christ. And without his exacting and thorough training in Jewish law, he would not have been able to use his intellect, his training, his rich understanding of the ways of God to become the primary theologian of the Church of the New Testament.")*

One final point, a point easily missed. Paul's conversion wasn't sudden; his re-cognition did not happen all at once. *This took time.* We know from his own words in Galatians 1 that Saul will remain there with the young church in Damascus about three years. Then, persecution will drive him out of Damascus and back to the town of his birth, Tarsus. Saul will work in Tarsus, and be nurtured by the Christian community there, some fourteen years before Barnabas comes to Tarsus to take him to Antioch. So, *seventeen years* take place between this experience on the Damascus Road and Paul's going on his first missionary journey ... seventeen years of nurture and re-cognating, which is the rough equivalent of the time between baptizing a child at this font and graduating that child from high school! Paul's conversion came to full fruition because of the support and faithfulness and encouragement of a whole host of obedient and faithful and courageous Ananiases in the church touching his life over the course of seventeen years; what a model of faithfulness for every church to emulate! No, it wasn't just the vision on the Damascus Road that suddenly converted Saul the persecutor into Paul the Apostle. That was a great start, to be sure, but there were many faithful Ananias-es along the way nurturing his full re-cognating of faith and life and service in light of his comprehended reality of the Lord Jesus, thus enabling him to develop into the effective apostle he became.

Some may be called to be Pauls. But many more of us are called to be Ananiases, simply staying obediently faithful right where we are sharing the loving, nurturing touch of the Spirit of God to all Jesus may bring our way.