**“A convert to more”**

**A Year C, Easter 3 Sermon based on Acts 9:1-20**

**Written by the Rev. Rachel Wildman, ©2016**

I have a friend named Amy from my days as an epidemiologist in New Orleans. Amy was testing interventions for addressing the racial gap in heart health, and she and her boyfriend not only began a neighborhood community group in the particularly struggling 5 block radius of their home, but were involved in community activism and social justice work throughout the city. Amy was doing work that every clergyperson hopes to see among the members of their congregation—living out the Gospel in every aspect of her life from Sunday straight through Saturday.

However, no clergyperson ever saw Amy in their congregation. Amy is an atheist—and not just a “we’ll have to agree to disagree” atheist, but what I would call a fundamentalist atheist—She wants me and everyone else to be convinced of her certitude that there is no God, and that, in fact, religion and God are fundamentally harmful concepts.

It has taken me many years to understand Amy’s position, built on decades of her own experience and careful thought, but her atheism was initiated during a week-long camp experience she had as a middle-schooler with the group Young Life. I don’t know a lot about Young Life’s theology or methods today, but back in the 1980’s, Young Life was a fundamentalist, evangelical Christian group for teens, of which the culminating experience was their summer camp, where teens were prepared for and encouraged to have their “conversion moment”—their “slain in the Spirit” experience. Amy will not talk about the particulars of her experience except to say that she never did successfully experience a conversion moment in that week, and her failure to do so was a deeply traumatic event for her.

I wonder if any of you have had a similar experience, or known of someone who has?

Each time I read of Paul’s Damascus moment and our Church’s heralding of his “Conversion” experience, part of me is incredibly inspired…AND…another part of me recalls stories like Amy’s, and the possible destruction the church’s excitement about conversion can bring about.

The word “Convert” comes from the Latin for “to turn around.” I’ve heard Paul’s conversion preached about as his “about face.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We hear of him today, pre-conversion, wrapped in fury, traveling to the synagogues of Damascus to capture those proclaiming Christ’s name and bind them and carry them back to Jerusalem. And then we hear of him post-conversion, proclaiming Jesus in the very synagogues he originally planned to use as his hunting grounds.

Paul sets up well the standard conversion rhetoric—the dichotomy between before and after-- sin and holiness, evil and love…

these are the dichotomies that were presented to Amy… she could continue being “wrong,” or she could change herself so that she would be acceptable—so that she would be “right”.

To me, a focus on judgment, on leaving ourselves behind and becoming someone entirely new is not what Paul’s conversion was about. Paul’s conversion has been argued by many not to be a conversion in this sort of way at all, but instead, a call from God to do something more. For Paul, there is not a lack of continuity between who he is pre-Damascus and who he is post-Damascus. Paul’s experience of himself even pre-Damascus is as a faithful Jew. What has changed is his understanding of what he is called to do as the faithful Jew that he is. This new call Christ is giving Paul is not in its broadest strokes about leaving one thing behind to do another—leaving himself behind to become someone new.

Certainly, Paul is being called to leave certain of his understandings and particular behaviors behind—to step out of persecuting those following Christ to advocating for them—but Paul will still be a faithful Jew. He is not being called away from his Judaism, but instead, as we will hear in the coming weeks, he is being called to invite the Gentiles into the chosen status of God’s people as well. Ultimately, the call is the opposite of us vs. them, wrong vs. right, and is, instead a call to inclusivity…to making a bigger community of those promised eternal life—to making God’s chosen MORE.

To be called to be More is, as Paul’s conversion makes so wonderfully clear, an act of unconditional, reckless love on Christ’s part. Paul, who, furiously enraged, has been persecuting followers of Christ, is not met with Christ’s own rage and fury, but instead, is granted divine status as an instrument of God’s own name, and loved into being the advocate for Christ’s message of chosenness to those long thought to be unchosen.

Conversion, then, is not, ultimately, the common cringe-producing notion of Amy’s experience. Conversion is the invitation from God to allow those parts of ourselves or our communities previously restricted, even silenced, to flourish—it is the invitation to become, ever more fully, who we are.

When I googled synonyms for “to be made more,” all sorts of fantastic words came up. Magnify…expand…swell…elaborate…even jazz up!! This is conversion, in my own experience. I have never had a momentary conversion…an immediate about-face. Rather, my conversion has been a slow process of deepening, of swelling, of being jazzed up. My conversion has taken a lifetime, and continues even now…there have been times of more acute “becoming more,” like leaving my scientific career and entering seminary…but, nothing of my true self has ever been left behind…rather, those parts of me I had no prior outlet for, or which were unwelcomed in prior contexts, or which I was too afraid to experience myself, have been called forth, and elaborated on. My analytical skills, so carefully honed in my scientific career—not left behind at all—made MORE in their application to theological questions, and thinking about challenging social problems…My love of wondering—definitely not left behind—again, made MORE in their application to being truly present to those of you in my care. My doubts…almost completely unacceptable in academic medicine—now, made so much more in the authentic way in which they express where I am, and in so doing, frequently invite others to their own authenticity.

What if my friend, Amy, had been invited to imagine what her life might look like if parts of her were swollen…expanded…jazzed up—if she, an awkward teenager worrying about being excluded, had not understood herself to be wrong as she was, and been asked to lose herself and become someone new, but instead, had understood conversion as an invitation to affirm herself and become MORE? What if she had understood what conversion *really* is?

What’s *your* conversion story? When were parts of you that were silenced, or restricted, or even unknown to you, delightfully magnified? Jazzed up? Given voice? When were you given the sacred invitation to be more?

May Christ extend his hand again to each of us…and this very day, turn us around…and around…and around…and convert us in a spin so graceful, so loving, that we flourish in the invitation to be ever more ourselves, ever more Christ’s. AMEN.

1. <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CActsEaster3.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)