

3 Easter – Year C – April 21, 2010 - Homily
Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19
Susan E. Wilmot

If we paid attention to the reading from the Acts of the Apostles tonight, no wonder we get shy about sharing our faith stories with one another, let alone complete strangers. Paul's story of his vision of the risen Lord and call to service is so remarkable and profound it's shared no less than three times in the New Testament. Okay Lord, we get it, Paul was a special case in point, but where does that leave us? Is our faith missing something if we haven't experienced a dramatic conversion, heard the voice of Christ speaking to us out of the blinding light of His glory, or been miraculously healed after three days of blindness? Steve let me borrow his yardstick tonight. Someone once wrote that on any given Sunday, we might do well to look around us, because there are likely to be a whole bunch of folks who nearly didn't come to worship that morning. Why? Because they somehow felt that their faith was lacking. In their own minds, they felt that their faith somehow doesn't measure up to the faith of others in the community. Take a moment to think about your own faith and where you would place yourself on the yardstick. Even as a seminary student, surrounded by faithful men and women who were pursuing a call from God to become ordained leaders in the church, several shared times when they really wanted to avoid coming to chapel services. In their own minds, they had been feeling unworthy or somehow lacking in faith. It's a common feeling. It's part of the human condition.

One of the first things we have to notice is that what happened to Saul is not the norm for conversion to the Christian faith. It's time to breathe out, and relax a little. While Saul's story is pretty radical, we might well agree with Flannery O'Connor, who once said, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse". Saul is avidly persecuting followers of the Way, filled with self-righteous anger and murderous thoughts. I think O'Connor was spot on, even though there's no mention of a horse in the reading from Acts, she knew that it would take some strong action on God's part to even make Saul slow down long enough to see that he was on the wrong path.

Another important point for each of us to notice is this. Whether we have always felt close to God and had the comfort of long-term faith from an early age, or whether we had our own conversion and call experience, the key player here is not Saul, but God in Christ Jesus. It is God in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit who changes lives. The Scriptures are full of stories of God touching the lives of very unlikely candidates for positions of leadership in God's kingdom. Look at Moses for example. He was brought up as an Egyptian, but somehow never lost touch with his Hebrew roots. He murders a soldier and runs far away to escape justice. God comes to him in the vision of the burning bush. Just like Saul, he doesn't know who he's talking to either! Then he tells God that he's not worthy to serve – he stutters, no one will believe him, etcetera, etcetera. Did it change God's plan for Moses' life? Not a bit. Did Saul's terrible persecution of Christians change the way God used him to share the Gospel with gentiles and Jews alike? Nope. When God is the agent of change, as God truly is, all things become possible.

We probably think of our own faith as something very personal, between God and us. In one way it is. The story of how we came to faith in Christ is unique to each of us. The timing is

all in God's hands. Yet in another way, our faith journey is meant to be communal. That's why we are members of the Body of Christ. Just by listening to another's story, we are encouraged in our own faith journey. God designed our experiences, and our spiritual gifts to be shared, in order to be witnesses to God's incredible grace, as well as to how God is working in our lives. Our task is to remain open to what God is doing in and around us, and there's a really good reason for that!

As strange as Saul's tale of conversion is, we all share in the fundamentals of what happens to Saul on the road to Damascus. As we heard on Sunday, every one of us has encountered the risen Lord multiple times in our lives – daily even. God desires that we accept His gift of faith – there is no quotient on this precious gift. No measure or amount that will make us more or less faithful in our response to God. In fact, I think we would have a good argument to say that when we feel that our faith is on the emergency reserve tank level, we are probably closer to God. And that because we have come to the end of self, and when we lose ourselves in Christ, we are ready for God's work.

The other side of Saul's experience that we also share is simply being on the wrong path, despite all our good intentions. Saul truly thought that he was standing firm in his defense of God. Jesus set him straight on that point right away. You and I have all been on paths that are injurious to others or ourselves. Times in our lives when we have stubbornly pursued our own goals and harmed our relationships, perhaps through workaholic tendencies, or addictive behaviors. How many of us spent at least some of our teen years in a fog of anger and resentment because of our parents at home, or in fear and misery because of the tragedy of bullying at school? How did we find our way back onto the right path? Was it through the kindness of a friend? Someone in our family perhaps who helped us to realize that our behavior was destructive and harmful to others and ourselves? Or was it that sense of emptiness? Even when we thought we had achieved our goal, it still wasn't enough, there was still something missing? Whatever we are struggling with now, God desires to show us the right path. Whatever it was that brought us back to God, we know that God was behind it: the stab of conscience, the restlessness, the blessed sanctuary of God's love or peace after long hours of stress and anxiety.

One of the best gifts of a community of faith is that we are all so diverse: diverse in our life experiences, diverse in our call to faith and vocation, diverse in where we are on the path with Christ. However inadequate we might be feeling on any given day, God does not use a yardstick to compare us, nor does God want us to compare ourselves with others. We are each blessed with our own special names and call to ministry. We have our own unique gifts that God unlocks for us to *share* with others, not *compare* with others. God looks at our hearts, finds just a grain of faith, and rejoices. The Good Shepherd gently uses his rod and staff to guide us, keep us safe, and lead us to new pastures, feeding us in His Body and Blood, and strengthening us for the work He has given us to do. Our journeys are not that different from Paul's: some of us need to feel the Godly equivalent of a two by four before we can see and hear the Lord; many of us do not. God is in charge. We just need to remember that, "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Amen.