

“Restored But Changed”

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John 21:1-19

Acts 9:1-20

When Saul became Paul, he experienced a grace that not only restored him from being blinded to seeing; the grace Jesus showed him also changed him into a person who could then change the world.

If you love Jesus and his followers, it is incredibly difficult to love someone like Saul, who walked around breathing threats and murder against the disciples of Jesus. If Saul had lived today, he might be posting his threats in extremist online chatrooms, or even worse, bringing his hatred and maybe even weapons into a church with plans for a frightening attack. It is hard to love someone like Saul.

Ananias, a disciple of Jesus in Damascus, had heard all about Saul. He knew that Saul was not only evil; his evil hatred was mixed with the power that the authorities had given him. It is one thing to live with a hateful person among you; but when a person like that gets the backing of a powerful group of people, you know that's real danger.

However, The Lord-- and we can presume that meant Jesus-- had something to say to Ananias. Coming in a vision, he instructed Ananias to lay hands on Saul and heal him from his blindness. When Ananias protested, Jesus urged him again, saying “Go. This man is the instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.”

Despite any hesitation, when Ananias entered the house, his greeting this: “Brother Saul.” He laid hands on Saul, and immediately the scales from his eyes fell off. Ananias' approach was gentle. It was compassionate. It offered a touch that was of God. Ananias helped change Saul into Paul, the man who would go forth proclaiming Jesus, saying “He is the Son of God!” not only in the synagogues, but also to the people who had never known God before.

I have known people like Ananias. They are people who were vehicles for God's transformation. Not only did they help to heal and change me, they also led me to better live into the abundant life to which God calls us.

When my mom died in a way that felt very traumatic to me, I wisely knew I needed to go to therapy to process my grief. Prayer was important, but I could not just pray the sadness away. Death was my entry ticket into therapy, but the process was a grace that surprised me in how life-giving it was for me. Not only did I have a space where I could explore and get care for all the difficult and ugly corners of my grief; I also grew in ways that helped my marriage, my sense of vocation, my parenting, my treatment of my body, and my sense of connection to God and to others. I did not expect all that. I came in seeking restoration, hoping I could become the happy person I was before my mother's death; but what I found was that I was a changed person, maybe not always happy, but living into the abundant life to which God calls me.

The Reverend Samuel Acosta understood the transformative power of counseling, which is why he started the Holistic Health Center at his church when he was a pastor at the Ravenswood Community Church in Chicago. Rev. Acosta died last Sunday, and his wife Yolanda is a part of our congregation. In an interview with the Chicago Tribune¹ almost 20 years ago, Rev. Acosta, a Colombian who held seminary degrees from Cuba, from Princeton, and from Loyola in Chicago, explained, "Hispanics fear the label of the mental health system; they don't feel comfortable reaching out to mental health care because in our culture, mental health care is considered a disgrace. The connotation when people go to a counselor is that he is crazy." But he noticed that Latinx people felt comfortable asking for the church's help in seeking care for problems with relationships or mental illness in ways that did not seem as acceptable as going to a therapist was for his community. In his counseling practice, he also tended to cultural differences that mattered-- such as instead of having very individualistic therapy practices, opening his sessions to family members as well, since Latinx culture is much more communal. He also integrated the spiritual with the psychological, knowing that in his community, the two are not so separate as the US tends to make them. From what I know from clergy colleagues in Chicago, Rev. Acosta was responsible not only for changing individual lives, but also removing the blinders in his community around the importance of mental health care.

Something I sometimes hear from Asian colleagues in ministry, and also from living in this community, is that Asians and Asian Americans face similar challenges in their

¹ Sue Ellen Christian, "Healing Minds Is Its Mission" in *The Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 4, 2000

views on mental health care. Additionally, our US health care system does not always make it easy to afford such care, and immigrants working hard to establish their lives here have a hard time justifying spending so much money on themselves. But it can be just as important as spending money on education. Instead of seeing counseling as spending money on yourself, I see it as an investment in family, an investment in health, and an investment in the future. The returns on investment might be preventing a divorce or a loveless marriage; it might be in raising emotionally resilient children; it can be a place where you learn what to do with unspent anger. It might be learning how to give up on an addiction to alcohol, or an addiction to misery. There are places where you can see a counselor for a sliding fee if you have financial need, but if you do have the money and are suffering emotionally, it is okay to make counseling a priority over other things you pay for. You could experience grace, learning how God can restore you, and not only that-- change you too.

Some of us may not even realize how deeply formed we are by old hurts. Perhaps that is why Saul was so hateful. Debie Thomas remembers what screwing up was like when she was a kid. Instead of receiving grace from her family members, she experienced shame. As she describes,

“I didn’t grow up in a home or culture that practiced restoration. Despite my family’s best intentions, we never found our way to a language of grace. We never said or heard, “I forgive you,” or, “It’s okay,” or “I still love you.” Instead, we abandoned the wrongdoer in our midst to a thick, damning silence. We withdrew affection to reestablish honor. We avoided eye contact, shut down authentic conversation, and rendered the offense and the offender invisible.

Eventually, after hours, days, or weeks — depending on the severity of the sin — the ice thawed, and life returned to a bruised normal. But a wound still festered below the surface. A thick, hot shame that filled my body and assured me that I was unfixable, unlovable, and wrong.”²

Saul, instead of shame, was shown grace. The powerful thing we know about God’s redemption is that nothing is beyond God’s repair. No one is beyond God’s love. If we turn to God, we can be made right again. That is the power of grace. But do not expect that can always happen as an encounter just between you and God. Having someone like Ananias in your life, who will have faith in your goodness even when you are difficult to love, someone who can open your eyes to the grace of God, is sometimes as important as having the encounter with God on your own.

² Debie Thomas, “You Know Everything” in *Journey with Jesus* blog, April 28, 2019

Grace means holding someone into accountability. But it also means calling them into a deeper relationship that is not the same. Grace puts you back on the path, but most likely you will not be walking the same direction. You will not be walking in the direction that continues to cause harm. Instead, you will walk in the direction that builds up the body of Christ. As we know from Paul's many letters that make up some of the most significant books of the bible, that is exactly what he did.

You may think that you came here today because you made a choice to withstand the rain. But a choice was made much earlier than that. It was made because a man's life was changed by an encounter with Jesus, and another kind man who helped him understand what that meant. In that spirit of transformation, may the powerful words of Jesus Christ continue to open our eyes and change us, shaping the directions of our journeys and forming the future of the world God gave us. Amen.