

**“Rehabilitating Paul”**

**Acts of the Apostles 9.1–20**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 22 April 2007**

I’d like to do a survey to start our time together. By a show of hands, how many of you have difficulty with the apostle Paul... because you think he’s a misogynist or a homophobe or because you think he didn’t really understand Jesus’ teachings, or for any other reason? How many of you have difficulty with Paul? (Raise your hands!) It’s okay to find Paul problematic. One of the chapter titles in Dom Crossan’s book, *In Search of Paul*, is “An Appealing or Appalling Apostle.”

A lot of folks in mainline churches, especially those of us on the progressive end of the spectrum have choked on some of what is attributed to Paul: “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.”<sup>1</sup> Or “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”<sup>2</sup> Do you find that appealing or appalling?

I’m not going to try to soft-peddle what we find in our scripture – whether it was really Paul or a later redactor, or whether we like it or not – because it is our scripture, and we have to deal with it. (Scholars have made strong arguments that neither of the above passages is authentically Paul.) I will say, however, that not all that was cultural normative around the Mediterranean 2,000 years ago is or ought to be a cultural norm for us today in North America. But at least they didn’t have school and university shootings.



Have you ever wondered why God chose Saul...which of course was Paul’s name before his dramatic conversion experience...to be the apostle to the Gentiles? Why didn’t God chose some eminent Greek philosopher or Roman senator? Why chose a Jew from Tarsus...in what is now Turkey? Paul by his own account was a persecutor of Jewish Christians. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, “I was violent in persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it.”<sup>3</sup> (It’s important to remember that there was not Church per se, and that Paul uses the word *ekklesia*, which meant the “gathering.”)

One of the truisms that I remember from political science was that “only Nixon could go to China,” meaning that it took someone who had built his career on anti-communism to establish détente with the Soviet Union and China. And it took a virulent anti-Christian to spread the faith to Europe.

Dom Crossan writes that Paul “converted not from Judaism to Christianity, of course, but from violent opponent and persecutor of pagan inclusion to nonviolent proponent and persuader of pagan inclusion. That which he persecuted *for* God was exactly that to which he was called *by* God.”<sup>4</sup>

Virtually all of us know that it was Paul who insisted that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of

<sup>1</sup> Titus 2.9–10

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. 14.33–35

<sup>3</sup> Gal. 1.13–14

<sup>4</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *In Search of Paul*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004, p. 6.

you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”<sup>5</sup> Do you find that appealing or appalling? That made it possible for Europeans to become followers of Jesus without converting to Judaism first, and for most Europeans, if the Jewish dietary codes didn't get you, the thought of unanesthetized circumcision would.

Think about it this way: If it weren't for Paul, Christianity would not have spread to Europe. It may have remained a Middle Eastern sect of Judaism, which would likely have died out in 70 AD when Rome destroyed Jerusalem. The Church in Jerusalem was, in fact, destroyed then, and if it had been Christianity's only center, we may probably wouldn't be sitting in this sanctuary today. So, if nothing else, most of us owe Paul a debt of gratitude for the presence of Christianity in our lives.



Clearly, it took a lot to shift Paul's ideas about becoming a follower of “The Way.” Today's text from the Acts of the Apostles is one of the key passages of scripture, so if you're new to Christianity, this is one of those important stories to know. If nothing else, it affirms that it's okay that some of us need to be “hit upside the head” with a 2x4 in order to get it. But, there was a lot that went on in this passage from the Acts of the Apostles.

Dom Crossan writes that this episode on the road to Damascus “was an inaugural moment of **apparition, revelation, conversion, and vocation** for Paul.”<sup>6</sup> I'm going to address each of those steps individually.

Paul never met the historical Jesus, the pre-Easter Jesus, the flesh-and-blood Galilean sage. His meeting with Jesus is in the form of an apparition – when Jesus appears to Saul and asks, “Why do you persecute me?” Not all of us will have a mystical experience like Paul did, but I think you would be surprised to know how many of us have had experiences of the Risen Christ.

Just because we have an experience of the Christ doesn't mean that there is a particular message revealed. Saul, though, did have a major revelation, telling him to go into Damascus and to wait for instructions.

Conversion is a strong word, one that has some baggage attached to it for some of us. But Paul certainly did have a conversion, turning him 180 degrees: from the greatest opponent of the Gospel to its greatest champion. Almost all of us have had moments of *metanoia*, when we have had a dramatic change of heart that has shifted our direction in life, sometimes religious and other times not. In many early Congregational churches of New England proof of a conversion experience was required for full membership in the church (so keep that in mind, confirmands and new members!).

What changes of heart have you had in your life that have changed your direction? It could be coming to the realization that you have an addiction that needs to be addressed, or that you really want to have children, or that you are gay, or that you really need to be part of a community of faith. *Metanoia* comes in all shapes and sizes, and Paul's example offers dramatic assurance that “doing a 180” is always possible. Perhaps your *metanoia* hasn't happened yet, or perhaps a second is on it's way, so stay awake and listen for God.

Here is another way to think about it: think of Saul's blindness as a metaphor for *not* seeing the way. It takes three days of not being able to see before his vision becomes

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<sup>5</sup> Galatians 3.28–29

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

clear. What can we ourselves not see clearly? What are the scales that need to fall away from our eyes so that we can see accurately what needs to be transformed in our lives?

Vocation is one of those theological terms that make it sound like the exclusive province of the clergy, and I'm sure that Sharon, Julie, or I would each be willing to tell you the stories of our vocation at some point, maybe over a glass of wine or a good cup of coffee...especially if you're buying. But vocation is what each of us is called to do.

One of my favorite brief definitions of vocation comes from the great Presbyterian writer and preacher Frederick Buechner, who writes, "There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest. By and large a good rule finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most need to have done."<sup>7</sup>

So, what are you called to do? Perhaps it isn't your profession, but rather something that you are called to beyond your work life. What do you need most to do that God's world needs as well?

Paul's life was literally turned upside down when he fell to the ground. Everything that he counted on, relied on as being true went topsy-turvy. Everything that he could see with such clarity now had been veiled in a shroud of darkness. And then a new vision was revealed to him.

We may not encounter a blinding light or hear the voice of the Risen Christ, so let us look for more subtle signs of the Lord's guidance in our midst, and may we respond by saying, "Here I am, send me!"

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 183.