

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, April 10, 2016)

Texts:

**John 21:1-19** and **Acts 9:1-6** (paraphrased)

*Please note: The following was presented as a dramatization of the texts by Pastor Donald and our liturgist, Rev. Lorraine Cenicerros.*

LORRAINE: Encountering Christ calls, restores, and commissions Christian community. The forms those encounters take vary widely, but they all can lead to renewal. For they remind us in whose presence we live and in whose name we serve.

As you listen to these two dramatic encounters with Jesus drawn first from the Gospel according to John, chapter 21 and then from Acts 9, I encourage you to be thinking about in what ways, and through what persons, have YOU encountered the Christ? What trust is required for YOU to risk changing, especially in your places of brokenness, so that God's Spirit may work renewal and restoration?

LORRAINE: There was one other time when Jesus appeared to the disciples—this time by the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: Thomas (the Twin), Nathanael (the Galilean from Cana), the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together with Simon Peter who said...

DONALD (to disciples): I am going fishing.

Choir: Then we will come with you.

LORRAINE: They went out in the boat and caught nothing through the night. As day was breaking, Jesus was standing on the beach; but they did not know it was Jesus.

DONALD: My children, you haven't caught any fish, have you?

Choir: No.

DONALD: Throw your net on the starboard side of the boat, and your net will find the fish.

LORRAINE: They did what He said, and suddenly they could not lift their net because of the massive weight of the fish that filled it. The disciple loved by Jesus turned to Peter and said:

DONALD: It is the Lord.

LORRAINE: Immediately, when Simon Peter heard these words, he threw on his shirt (which he would take off while he was working) and dove into the sea. The rest of the disciples followed him, bringing in the boat and dragging in their net full of fish. They were close to the shore, fishing only about 100 yards out. When they arrived on shore, they saw a charcoal fire laid with fish on the grill. He had bread too.

DONALD (to disciples): Bring some of the fish you just caught.

LORRAINE: Simon Peter went back to the boat to unload the fish from the net. He pulled 153 large fish from the net. Despite the number of the fish, the net held without a tear.

DONALD: Come, and join Me for breakfast.

LORRAINE: Not one of the disciples dared to ask, "Who are You?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus took the bread and gave it to each of them, and then He did the same with the fish. This was the third time the disciples had seen Jesus since His death and resurrection. They finished eating breakfast.

DONALD: Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these other things?

LORRAINE: Yes, Lord. You know that I love You.

DONALD: Take care of My lambs. (pause) Simon, son of John, do you love Me?

LORRAINE: Yes, Lord. You must surely know that I love You.

DONALD: Shepherd My sheep. (pause) Simon, son of John, do you love Me?

LORRAINE: Peter was hurt because He asked him the same question a third time... (then, as Peter): Lord, You know everything! You know that I love You.

DONALD: Look after My sheep. I tell you the truth: when you were younger, you would dress yourself and go wherever you pleased; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and take you to a place you do not want to go.

LORRAINE: Jesus said all this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After this conversation, Jesus said,

DONALD: Follow Me!

LORRAINE: Saul, still breathing threats against the disciples of Jesus, received letters of permission from the religious authorities in Jerusalem to haul into jail members of the so-called "Way" who followed Jesus.

DONALD: Now "The Way" is an expression for the Christian community in the Book of Acts. In Hebrew scriptures, the "Way" was an expression for living in conformity with the Torah. The use of this title here in Acts suggests that perhaps its audience continued to regard itself as a part of the Jewish community.

LORRAINE: Here you will move to the center of the altar as I move down the steps and "become" Saul and you "become" Jesus. :<)

LORRAINE: And as Saul was going to Damascus, a light flashed and he fell to the ground.

DONALD: And there on the ground, Saul heard a voice speaking.

LORRAINE: Saul, Saul, why do you pursue me to do harm?

DONALD: Who are you, master?

LORRAINE: I am Jesus, the one you have been pursuing. So get up, and go to Damascus. You will be told what I would have you do.

DONALD: Saul's travelling companions stood speechless. They heard the voice, but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground. But even with eyes wide open, Saul could see nothing.

LORRAINE: Saul had to be led by hand to Damascus. For three days he was without sight and had nothing to eat or drink.

DONALD: Now there was a follower of the Way in Damascus named Ananias, and Ananias had a vision.

LORRAINE: Ananias!

DONALD: Here I am, Lord.

LORRAINE: Get up and go to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. Ask for the one from Tarsus named Saul, who is praying right now. Saul, too, has had a vision – of you coming in and laying hands on him, restoring his sight.

DONALD: Whoa, Lord! I have heard a lot about this one. Saul has brought nothing but grief on your followers in Jerusalem. I've heard that Saul comes here to lay hands on us!

LORRAINE: Go! Saul is an instrument of my choosing to bring my name before Gentiles and rulers and my people in Israel. By the way, I myself will show Saul how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

DONALD: So Ananias went to the house and laid hands on Saul, saying, "Brother Saul, Jesus, whom you met on the way here, sent me so you may see again and be filled with the Spirit."

LORRAINE: And at Ananias' touch, Saul's sight was restored. When Saul got up, Ananias baptized him. Then Saul ate, spent a couple of days with the people of the Way in Damascus, and then proclaimed in the synagogue:

BOTH: Jesus is the Son of God!

### Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Shouts and Murmurs"**

If you've known me for a while, or perhaps even if you've only encountered me today, you might know that I really do love DRAMA! Not in my personal life, mind you, but definitely in the arts and even within the scriptures. Which is a good thing since the Bible is certainly full of drama, wouldn't you agree?

In looking at our lectionary texts for today, it was pretty easy to go with the extraordinarily dramatic story of the Saul to Paul conversion what with his being struck to the ground and blinded by the light. Indeed, the very dramatic Bruce Springsteen song by that name is most apropos here as the original lyrics continue, "cut loose like a deuce, another runner in the night" seeing as "cut loose like a deuce" is a common Jersey/New York slang phrase to describe anything you want to get rid of. Just as God seemed to want to get rid of the old Saul's *raison d'être* and replace it with the Christ consciousness he didn't even realize he was running after. You never know what you might learn coming to church here do you? Urban dictionary lovers, anyone?!

With my love of high drama, then, it was surprising to find that I was also drawn to the gentler, quieter lectionary passage found in the Gospel according to John that started off our readings today. Here, there isn't nearly as much "sturm und drang" as in our Damascus drama or even as in another stormy story that finds the disciples out on the waters. Instead, as we encounter the solitary figure on the shore calling out to those on the sea, we hear a rather milder calling, an invitation, if you will, to try a different way, to see if listening to the calmer call of Jesus might provide the same results as a lightning bolt that strikes you from your horse and lays you low on the ground with scales covering your eyes.

But what drew me to include both of these stories today is the tremendous similarity between them as they each involve the call of the Christ to see a different way, to experience a deeper truth and to be converted and transformed either through a quiet call from the shore or a bombastic call from the heavens.

As with most if not all of the accounts we have in the scriptures, there is much dispute over what really happened and what did not in both of these stories. I'm intrigued by the number of theologians and commentators that I read as I explore these passages each week who love to pick apart every piece of every account and work to either prove or disprove their veracity. It can be intriguing, absolutely, and is probably why these people are theologians and commentators, but the writers that speak to ME the most are the ones who see within these stories handed down to us throughout the millennia the ways in which God was speaking to people then and the ways in which God is still speaking to us now.

It's good to know, for instance, as Dr. David Lose tells us that our first story about Jesus and the disciples is considered an, " 'epilogue' to John's dramatic and symbolic Gospel, while perhaps not part of the 'original' Gospel..." "Scholars," he writes, "have posited a variety of reasons for this additional chapter: questions about the fate of the "beloved disciple," the need to rehabilitate Peter as the Johannine community moved closer to other communities more familiar with Peter's significant role in the early church, the need to "position" this Gospel among the other stories of Jesus circulating

at the time.” AND, as he also notes, “it provides a clue not only to the questions and fate of this early Christian community but sheds light on key elements of our life as disciples today.” Amen, Dr. Lose. And there is where we can enter the story and glean the most from it.

Similarly, Eric Barreto, an Associate Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul comments on our Saul to Paul story today as he lets us know that, “Acts (the companion book to the Gospel of Luke which precedes it and in which this story is found) was written by a Christian for other Christians. That is, Luke’s readers know who this Saul is; they know what turns his life will take. In short, they and we know how the movie ends! But by introducing him in this way,” Professor Barreto posits, “Luke establishes the dramatic u-turn Saul’s life is about to take. In doing so, he draws a portrait of calling that continues to shape how we understand God’s graceful but not always subtle or easy pull on our lives.”

You can see why I appreciate the approach these two scholars and commentators take to the scriptures. For in their grounding of the scriptures in their historical and cultural contexts, they also continue to see where what is being written is still alive and beneficial to those of us living and serving today.

How do YOU experience the call to convert or, one might say, make a change in your life and your thinking, I wonder. In his article, “Blindsided,” Rev. Larry Patten writes that, “some [conversions] are quiet; some spectacular like a rearing horse. [and] some...have hearts “strangely warmed.”” He goes on to talk about the closest conversion experience he’s had in the way he felt called to the ministry. “It included a solitary walk and a view of the mountains,” he writes. “Unbidden words of encouragement flooded my mind, having little to do with my thoughts and more with God’s nudging and nurturing. Since that “call,” I’ve looked back and imagined the walk as longer or the nearby mountains more foreboding. All in all, though, being as honest as possible with memories, my call, my conversion, was mostly low-key. Except,” he adds, “that it transformed my life.”

I’ve had both gentle and radical experiences with conversion to tell you the truth. I’d definitely take the low-key, “hey, why don’t you try throwing your net on the other side” approach if it was my choice, but sometimes, like Saul, we are heading down such a disastrous path and making such wildly whacky choices that we really do need a lightning bolt from the sky or the very shaking of the ground beneath us to wake us up and rattle the very foundations of our beliefs and our present way of doing things.

I don’t believe that God creates illness or manufacturers natural disasters or makes accidents happen or even hurls lightning bolts, but I do believe that God can take and use these occurrences in our lives to wake us up to ways in which we aren’t living up to our fullest potential or making the best and healthiest decisions for ourselves or for how we relate to others.

Where are the places in your lives where you know you need conversion? Are there consumption issues, perhaps? A little too much food, a little too much drink, a little too much reliance on the world’s diminishing resources? Are there ways in which God is calling you to wake up and smell the organic, free-trade coffee or think about using your two legs instead of your four wheels now and then? Remember, every good sermon is one we preach to ourselves! Or maybe there’s something even deeper that needs transforming in your life. Are you hearing the call and responding to it or is it just getting louder and louder?

I’m especially intrigued by the Saul to Paul story because of the way in which it focuses not only on the conversion of our protagonist, but also shows the ways in which one person’s transformation affects those around him or her and those that God will call into the story as well.

Here, of course, I’m speaking of Ananias in particular. That Damascus Disciple who wished he hadn’t had the hummus before heading to bed and was prodded awake by a vision of the Lord telling him to go find Saul of Tarsus and lay hands on him. Say what?! As Ananias himself says, thinking God must have gotten his signals mixed up (isn’t it interesting how we think God just must not have

enough information when we don't like the Call we're getting?), [this is from The Message] "Master, you can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he's shown up HERE with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us."

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine what it would take to hear the voice of God telling you to do something so terrifying and against reason and follow it anyway? That takes some mighty conviction. That takes some incredible courage. That takes a faith that truly believes in God's calling on one's life.

In all of our players' lives today, we see a conversion in thought and attitude brought about by God's call in their present situation. For Peter and the disciples, they had to wake up to the fact that Jesus was still among them and was still calling them to love more deeply, to feed His sheep and to care for all people whether he, Jesus, was with them physically or not. In fact, he needed to ask it again and again as if prodding Peter to pull from the deepest part of his soul that conviction that he truly was part of the Christ and able to love fully through whatever happened to him.

For Saul and for Ananias it was a call to a radical change in thinking and being in this world. For Saul, it took being thrown from his horse and being blind for three days without food or drink before he could feel the love of the Christ flood through him and change him forever as Ananias laid his hands upon him and then baptized him with the water of the Holy Spirit.

For Ananias, it was having faith to do what God was asking him to do even though it terrified him and defied his own logic. What a feeling must have coursed through him as he followed through, and laid his hands upon the head of the one who had breathed threats and actually murdered those he had known and loved. What a thrill of glory divine for him to see the transformation of one such as that become one of the strongest voices for Christ the world would ever know.

"[The] realization that Someone is living in us and through us is exactly how we plug into a much larger mind and heart beyond our own," Father Richard Rohr writes in his essay, "Dying to Self." "Afterward, we know in a different way, although we have to keep relearning this truth over and over again (the point of daily prayer). But it demands a major dying of our own small self, our ego. Maybe that's why so few go there. As Jesus clearly puts it, one "self" must die for another "Self" to be born."

Where will you experience conversion in your life this week? Will it be in a small quiet way as you are asked to try a different path? Or maybe it will come about through something extraordinary and life shattering. Whatever way God calls, I pray you will take the time to listen deeply and to know that whatever change is required of you, God will give you the strength to see it through.

Amen? Amen.