

## “In a Flash of Light, Everything Can Change!”

### Acts 9:1-19a

It is ironic that no matter how many times we hear a story, we honestly think we know all the details. We've all heard this story from Acts multiple times. I grew up hearing this story taught in Sunday school and in church. I remember hearing this story shared with me at church camps and vacation Bible Schools. I remember always hearing that this was the story about how Saul became Paul. I remember always hearing that this was the story about how Paul becomes a completely new person for God. I remember always hearing that this was the story about how Saul takes on a new identity for Lord. And I'm sure many of you also remember hearing the same things about this story along the way as well.

So I will tell you that this week, my world was shaken when a particular commentator shared that in reality, Saul never changes his name to Paul. Saul's transformation is not about him becoming a completely different person. Saul's transformation or conversion is more of an awakening than a personality change. The truth is that on the road to Damascus, even after his experience with the risen Lord, Saul remains Saul: the good, the bad, and the ugly. What transforms or awakens is his understanding of the Kingdom of God and how it calls us to a new

way of interacting with one another, this time seeing everyone through Kingdom Vision.

Even after his experience on the road to Damascus, Saul remains Saul. He is now just awoken to the person that God created him and calls him to be.

Now, I know this information about Saul's name seems like a minor detail in the grand scheme of things. And, let's be honest, it really doesn't change that much about the beloved story either. Saul has an experience with the Risen Lord, realizes his misconceptions and becomes one of the most influential apostle of the early church.

So what difference does it make if his name changed or not? Saul/Paul did great things for the church. Who cares what his name was really? The early church owes him a debt of gratitude for what he did do as Paul or Saul or whatever we want to call him. All that really matters is that he went out and spread the gospel because he had an encounter with the Risen Christ. Right? Well, yes, part that is only part of the story.

Saul/Paul really was a great apostle and we as the church owe him many thanks but all week, I couldn't get passed how just learning some new information like the detail of his name change or lack thereof added a whole new dimension to the story or how by engaging the text as it was written, changed my whole

perspective and understanding of this story. I know it seems minor in the grand scheme of things but this minor detail shook my whole world. Everything I thought I knew and understood about this story was based on what I assumed or what I thought I knew, or maybe worse, what had been shared with me by other people. In truth, I don't know if I really know the story or just accepted what people told me to me to believe about this story.

Everything I thought I knew about this story, in reality, is not based on facts. Saul's name doesn't change. He doesn't become a completely different person. He isn't converted. He still remains tied to his Jewish heritage. And he certainly doesn't become nice and easy to work with simply because he had an experience with the Risen Lord.

Just this little bit of minor detail, like Saul's name change or lack thereof, made me realize that I don't know the story really at all and it got me to thinking about what else I have missed in life, in the Bible, in general simply because I assumed that I knew the whole story, simply because I assumed I thought I knew the details, simply because I allowed my misconceptions and misperceptions to guide my way of thinking, guide my way of being.

Now I will tell you that I did find some relief to my confusion and world-shattering experience. The commentator went on to say that after the experience on

the road to Damascus, basically what happens in his ministry, with all the letters that Saul/Paul wrote is that if in Jewish contexts, Saul would use his Jewish name, Saul and if in a Roman context, he would use his Roman name, Paul but deep down, Saul was still the same person he was when he had the experience on the road to Damascus.

Once again, I know this doesn't seem like much but for me, it restored my world to an even keel. Before the experience on the Road to Damascus, Saul was ornery, passionate, devoted, and driven and after, the experience, Saul was still ornery, passionate, devoted and driven. These things didn't change just because he had an experience with the Risen Lord.

What does change for Saul is that he realizes that he was using all the things that made him who he was for the wrong purpose. After his experience on the road to Damascus, he began to look at things from God's perspective. He began to see things with eyes filled with Kingdom vision. Before his experience, Instead of building up the Kingdom of God through his passionate and driven nation, Saul was tearing it down. He was using his very being, the things that made him him, the things that God gave him to build up the Kingdom of God to persecute God and bring death which ultimately goes against our basic calling as people claimed and named by God. In all things, we are called to use our gifts and talents, even if those gifts and talents are being passionate, ornery, and driven, to build up the

Kingdom of God and to use them to become the person God created and calls us to be.

And Saul was simply not doing that all because he assumed he knew how the story was supposed to end. All because he assumed he knew all the details. All because he knew he was right in his understandings and preconceived notions. Saul allowed his misconceptions and misperceptions about God and how God works to guide him rather than allowing God's love and grace to be his way.

You see, the power in Saul's story is not that after his experience with the Risen Lord, he becomes some great apostle, doing amazing things for the church. The power in Saul's story is that the grace and love of God changed his understandings, changed his perceptions, changed his very way of life and how he interacted with others. The power in Saul's story is that he was awakened to the person that God created him and called him to be.

The thing Saul realized and the thing we also need to understand is that the key to our experiences with the Risen Lord is that it is something God does, not something we do. We don't have the power to change ourselves or changes others simply because we want them to change or because we want to change.

Awakenings and transformation can only happen through God and by us having an experience with the Risen Lord. God awakens us to the potential of the Kingdom

of God and the potential of who we are created to be by showing us love and grace in unexpected and life transforming ways. God does this by opening our eyes, and shattering our misperceptions and misconceptions. God does this by showing us there is another way.

God shows us that we can be more than just who we think we are. We can use our God given talents to become the person that God created us to be.

That's why this is such a powerful story. It doesn't move us because Saul had some life changing event and becomes a great apostle. The power of this story is that God still used Saul, the good, the bad, and the ugly to build up the Kingdom of God, sometimes in spite of what made Saul Saul. The power in this story is that an experience with the Risen Lord shatters our misconceptions and our misperceptions of who we are, our misconceptions and misperceptions of who others may be and allows us to discover the Truth: that God, and only God, knows the whole story, that God, and only God, knows the full details of everyone's story and thankfully, God still works through our stories, works through us to bring about the Kingdom of God and to help us become the people that God created us to be.

An experience with the Risen Lord changes everything. It changes our understandings. It changes our assumptions. It changes what we thought we knew

because our experiences with the Risen Christ invite us to see things more clearly, to see things from God's perspective, to live our lives with Kingdom Vision, leading us and guiding us along the way.

The power in Saul's story is the same as it is for us. An experience with the Risen Christ can change everything. It can change our attitudes. It can change our understandings. It can change our very way of being, awakening us to the person that God calls us to be. Because now we have experienced God's grace and God's love in our lives in life-giving and life-transforming ways.

When we experience Christ in our lives, it is not just only that we transformed but rather we become more aware of the power of God's love and grace for ourselves and for others. We began to be the person God created and calls us to be.

Now, we think the story ends there but in reality it continues. it is not only Saul who Christ transforms. There is another in this story, Ananias. And truth be told, now that I am looking at this story again, I would say that Ananias' transformation is almost as powerful as Saul's, if not maybe a little more.

Sure Saul goes off and does great things for the church but Ananias' ministry affects those in his own community. He gets reminded that even good church folk, you know the ones that are supposed to share God's grace and love,

don't always understand what God is thinking when it comes to our understanding of the Kingdom of God.

What I love about this story is not that faithful person is having conversations with God. We see that Ananias is used to God talking to him. He is not caught off guard to hear God's voice. That's what we are called to do as people of faith to be in conversation with our God.

What I love about this story is that what does surprise Ananias and what catches him off guard is the fact that God asks him and expects him to go and see someone like Saul, someone who has come to hurt or kill Ananias, someone who has come to destroy Ananias' world. What surprises Ananias the most is that God expects him to go and heal Saul.

To which, Ananias says, God, you must be crazy. Surely you don't expect me to go and see someone like Saul, to go and meet this person.

Well, we know the answer to this. God says, Um, yeah, I do. I have chosen this person, this person that you think is unworthy, to be my instrument of love and grace.

You see, An experience with the Risen Lord changes everything, shattering our misconceptions and misperceptions, even when we think we know just how the story is supposed to go. That's why we love this story, especially the Saul/Paul

part so much. We love stories about bigger than life personalities, stories about how someone turned his or her life around. We love these stories because they inspires us and motivates us to allow the Risen Christ in our lives so that we can be transformed. We love these stories because they help us expect grand things from our God. Stories like Saul's make us believe that God is going to come to us in a flash of light and change our world in an instant.

And as powerful and amazing as Saul's transformation story really is, I would argue that our stories, our journeys of faith, our transformations and awakenings line up more with Ananias'. Just like him, we try to be faithful people, doing the best that we can, trying to live out God's love and grace through our words and actions, but even we don't know all the details of the story of God's love and grace. We need God to work in small and ordinary ways every day of our lives to awaken us because we tend to allow our misconceptions and misperceptions about ourselves and others to lead us and guide.

We need God constantly surprising us through encounters in our lives to remind us that God is going to do what God has to do to build up God's Kingdom on earth, even if it doesn't quite fit into what we think we know or assume is right. We need God to constantly show us that God is going to keep changing this world through the power of God's love and grace and is constantly going to keeping

helping us become the people God created us and calls us to be, regardless of what we think we know or how we think the story should end.