

Pentecost VI, July 4, 2021, Daniel Garner Tate
2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10, Psalm 48, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

Paul the Apostle had a dramatic conversion experience when he was traveling on the road to Damascus. Prior to this he had been persecuting Christians. He was struck down by a bolt of light, saw Jesus, and heard Jesus tell him to stop and to follow him. He was blinded and could not eat for three days. He had a revelation, a new understanding, a new purpose. His eyesight and strength were restored, and then he devoted the rest of his life to preaching the gospel.

Today we will be reading from his letter to the Corinthians, and in it he says that he doesn't like talking about this experience because he doesn't want people to think he's bragging, that he is somehow special, or better than other people. I agree with this some. It is wise to be modest about our experiences and accomplishments. But at the same time, I don't agree. We all have a personal story about God being present in our lives, and when we share it, we are sharing the Good News. We are giving evidence that God is real to us.

God was with me when I was caregiving for my parents as they were dying. Through prayer and the people I met along the way at just the right time, God became very present for me, and helped me somehow get through it. It changed me to the core, clarified my priorities and made me change the direction of my life. It was the foundation for my going into ministry. These stories when we tell them to each other are what bind us together as a community, and when we don't talk about them, it's easy to forget, and to become hard, and to become ungrateful.

When we share our stories of God in our lives, we also bring new people into our community. Bishop Marc talks about this in his videos about evangelism on the DioCal website. He says that we don't have just one story, but we have an endless number of stories of God, experiences of feeling at one with the divine. Transformations. Unique to each of us. This has been true for me too. Many, many stories. If we think we haven't, we aren't looking closely enough. If I look closely, before that life defining change with my parents, there were many experiences prior to it that I had of God directing me, even if I

didn't know it at the time. People encouraging me to go to college, inspiring me with their stories. And the same is true now. I'm more aware of it now. People I see as a chaplain in the hospital inspire me with their courage when facing life threatening illnesses. I see God working in them, and because I do, God works in me. Every day we can be transformed if we pay attention.

I think it's wrong to shut up about our stories, the stories of our revelations, our growth, our relationship with God. They connect us to one another. God's grace works through us to the benefit of others when we share. Hearing ourselves tell our stories reaffirms our commitment to God and reminds us to be grateful for the life God has given us. We don't need to tell everyone, but at least the people we trust.

Looking further down in Paul's letter, he talks about a metaphorical thorn in his side that he prayed over and over about, asking God to take away. He doesn't say what the thorn is, and it is good that he doesn't, that way we can imagine what it is and identify with Paul, putting ourselves into his story. The thorn is a weakness that maybe God thinks Paul needs to keep. Maybe it's depression, or a physical disability. We don't know why, but maybe it's to keep him humble, or help him to have empathy with others. If he was perfect, how could he identify with anyone else, how could he be friends with anyone since all of us have weaknesses of some kind.

In our Mark gospel reading, Jesus returns to his hometown. He has been away for a while, and his family and friends can tell he's changed. He has a reputation now too. Stories have been circulating about his miracles. "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hand?" They are astounded. But then they do an about face. How can this be? He's just a carpenter. Who does he think he is? He's just the son of Mary and Joseph. He is just a brother to his sisters and brothers. I'm sure you have experienced this yourself, some person who refuses to acknowledge some new skill that you've mastered, or some accomplishment that has changed your status.

Part of this is human nature. When we're around our friends and families all the time, we don't notice the incremental changes we all go through each day. It is easy to think that things are fixed. If we don't see each for a while, it can be a shock to see how much people have changed. Every day we are growing and changing.

Sometimes it might be jealousy or competition that might be the problem. In the Luke version of the story the Nazarene towns people are openly hostile and drive Jesus out of town and try to throw him off a cliff.

But this is who Jesus is. To be accepted, is he supposed to stay in town and be the carpenter that they want him to be, or is he going to move on and be the person he was put on earth to be? It's something to ask ourselves. Do we conform to expectations that people have for us? Or, do we follow our souls desire that God has put in us.

This attitude toward Jesus doesn't happen just in his hometown. Last Sunday in our gospel reading we saw Jesus healing the hemorrhaging woman and raising a little girl from the dead. Prior to raising the girl up, he told the people that the girl was just sleeping, and they laughed at him. They don't believe. They want to limit him. They don't have faith. This is how it is for us sometimes. Sometimes we might be laughed at because we are unique, or gifted, and can do something that only we can do.

Later in our gospel reading, Jesus empowers the disciples and sends them out two by two. This connects to the weakness as a strength thing that Paul talks about. If we work together, we are not isolated. If one of us falls, the other can be there to pick us up. If one is weak in one area, the other can make up for it with their strength.

I think the many lessons that our epistle and gospel readings have to offer are to remind us that we are perfect the way we are, that our self-perceived weaknesses are not really weaknesses, but just simply another way of being, and they can be strengths if we look at them in the right way. The lessons tell us that our experiences of transformation because of God's touch in our lives, are worth sharing with others in order to join us together in community, and to help us to reach out to others.

