Every once in a while, someone will ask me how I came to discern a call to the priesthood. Surely, it’s not an unusual question for people to ask of clergy. There’s a curiosity about what brings a person to live out their faith in a particular way. Given what we hear about Paul today, I have to confess that there are times I find myself wanting to apologize that I don’t have a dramatic story to tell. The “call” to ministry I experience is, and has been, one of a gradual, one foot in front of the other, and often unsteady, “coming to” in relationship with God.

Truth be told, I’m a bit jealous of people who describe their coming to discern a call to ministry, lay and ordained, as a “Damascus Road experience”. Now I don’t doubt what they say, far from it. What I feel is outright envy. I think it’s not just a little bit ironic, that in the two foundational structures in my life, *Christianity and a program of recovery*, there are stories of two men – Saul of Tarsus and Bill Wilson - that have conversion experiences, manifesting with blinding light.

In December of 1934 Bill Wilson was in Towns Hospital off Central Park in NYC for what would be his last detoxification. During this hospitalization Bill had what he described as a dramatic “spiritual experience.”

*“My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the bottom of the pit. I still gagged badly on the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for the moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy was crushed. All at once I found myself crying out, ‘If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!’*

*Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in my mind’s eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, ‘So this is the God of the preachers!’ A great peace stole over me and I thought, ‘No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are still all right. Things are all right with God and His world.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

That “spiritual experience” marked the beginning of new life for a man that had been told he would likely die a hopeless “drunk”. It is a label, a name that is changed in that moment to a new one, “sober”.

Saul gets a new name too. We see him today, pre-Damascus road, breathing threats and murder against the followers of “The Way”. Devout Pharisee that he is, he sees the believers as a threat to all that he holds dear and holy. He is a zealot for the faith, dedicated and true in heart for all that he has ever believed. Wrapped in his zeal, he goes forth, with all the support of the religious hierarchy, to capture and bind those proclaiming Christ, and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

It’s such a contrast to the binding authority in the Spirit that Jesus breathes into his disciples we heard of in John last Sunday.

Saul’s experience on the road is dramatic and perhaps that is the only way that Jesus could get the attention of this man who described himself in the letter to the Philippians*…”If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless”*

Paul’s conversion story in Acts is his turning around. It is not that he is changed into something new. There is much of Saul that remains in Paul. His dedication, his sureness of purpose as a faithful Jew, is now centered in Christ. Ultimately, he is not being moved away from who he is, but to who God calls him now to be with.

Paul’s is not the only conversion story we hear today. Ananias, faithful follower of “The Way”, answers the call, “Here I am, Lord”, and is presented with what must have seemed like an impossible mission. YOU WANT ME TO GO TO WHO AND DO WHAT! Do you know what evil this person has done against you, Lord?

What an incredibly difficult thing this must have been for Ananias to do! Imagine being asked to go and tend to a man that has been responsible for terror in your own community. One writer points out that even being in Saul’s presence may have meant a death sentence for Ananias, a deep betrayal of the community of The Way. But the Lord reveals to Ananias the call that has been given to Saul:

that this persecutor of the followers of the risen Lord is now the one to bring the gospel to kings and Gentiles, and he will suffer for the sake of the gospel.

So, trusting in God, Ananias goes and finds the man ….and he lays his hands upon Saul’s head, calling him “Brother Saul”. Paul is not met with Christ’s anger or wrath, but with a love that transforms.

The People of the Way is a powerful metaphor for our Christian identity. These early communities of Christ followers were defined less by a set of beliefs, than by their character in the world, their way of being with each other. Descriptions of them in Acts tell of radical sharing and caring. In fact, Ananias is one of those who has sold a parcel of land he owned and has given the proceeds to be distributed in the community.

These two conversions are for us a vison of how the Christ now shapes community, and shapes the hearts and lives of believers, then and now. God’s love and forgiveness are without bounds, without limit. God’s capacity for forgiveness and redemption is truly startling.

Paul’s conversion is in essence a call to MORE[[2]](#footnote-2). Christ is calling Paul to be more, to become more in the service of God’s extravagant plan. As we travel with Paul and the other followers of The Way in the book of Acts, there are many more conversions to come – centurion, Ethiopian, Samaritan. And through these encounters with unexpected people and in unpredictable ways, the disciples are changed. And isn’t that the way it happens, that we are often the ones that are changed by our touching the lives of others? The main character in any conversion story is God. When God is the agent of change, all things are possible.

When touched by light and wind, Bill Wilson was given a gift. Bill himself would say that the true blessing was that he could only keep that gift by giving it away. Conversion actually shares the same Latin root as the word conversation. It simply means to turn around…turn around a thought, an idea with another person. Talk things over, get a different perspective. Discover something new about that person, their faith, your faith. As we converse, we gain perspective, we are different, we are forever changed, simply because we have shared each other in some small way.

This is the way I might describe my conversion, my own growing sense of call to God’s MORE as a person of faith. It is better compared to an ember that burns within than a bright light shining from the outside. This journey of spiritual awakening has been slow and gradual, building in understanding, growing with each encounter, with every conversation, with every question asked, doubt confessed, and confidence shared. I pray and I trust that process will never come to a close. I believe God has MORE in store for me…MORE in store for you.

I love the prayer we offer for the newly baptized. I pray it now that we might be reminded of the MORE that God has in store for us always.

*Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy
Spirit you have bestowed upon your servants the
forgiveness of sin and have raised us to the new life of
grace. Sustain us, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give us*

*an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to*

*persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy*

*and wonder in all your works. Amen.*

1. Anonymous, (Bill Wilson) (1957) Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age.  New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, Inc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thank you Rachel Wildman, for your ideas about God’s MORE. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)