



"A One-Eighty"

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Hayward, California*

*Third Sunday after Easter 2010
April 18, 2010
Acts 9:1-20 (NRSV)*

This morning I begin with a "shout out" to all the bikers in the congregation. Thank you for taking a chance on Eden Church today. I especially thank those who are worshipping with us for the first time, who don't have a church home, and who have never had a church home.

I think it takes a lot of courage to try something new like going to church, or going to a church that's new to you. So welcome to all of you. I look forward to greeting you and all of our guests who are here for the bike and biker blessing. If you are looking for a church home, we hope that you'll consider making Eden Church that place.

Now, on to today's scripture. I didn't really plan it this way, but it's interesting to me that today's text provides a great backdrop for our bike and biker blessing.

Saul's conversion took place on the main road between Palestine and Damascus. You know where Palestine is on the map of the Mediterranean area. The city of Damascus is located to the northeast of Palestine. One had to, and still does have to, go through Damascus to get from Palestine to all points north and east of Palestine when traveling on the ground in the Near East.

It doesn't take too much imagination to recast Saul's story in a modern context. Imagine, if you will, Saul riding a Harley rather than on a horse. Imagine that the bright light he experienced on the Road to Damascus was a bolt of lightning, or the halogen lights of an obnoxious driver passing on the other side of the road.

Imagine too that rather than falling off his horse, Saul dumped his "Hog," and that the voice he heard and the temporary blindness he endured from the fall were the product of a concussion.

Imagine further that Saul's accident was the beginning of a whole new way of life for him. Imagine Saul as a changed man, a person who, in biker-speak, did a "one-eighty" that night on the road to Damascus.

For Saul, that one-eighty involved switching from being a self-described “enemy of the gospel” to being a leading apostle, and from being a person who bound and jailed the followers of Christ, to becoming a leading advocate for Christ who beckoned others to follow the way, the truth, and the light.

Saul was a changed man, and with his change came the embrace of a new name, “Paul.”

Name changes were common for converts in the early church. This practice of name-changing continued throughout some parts of Christianity to this day. For example, in the Roman Catholic Church it is still common for women who enter religious life to embrace a new name as a sign that they have embraced their religious vocation.

Of course, Christianity doesn’t have the corner on the market of name changing practices. Many organizations, including biker clubs, give members a new name when they are initiated into a club. I remember, for example, that Clyde Nachand, in whose memory we are dedicating today’s bike and biker blessing, was given new names when he joined some biker clubs in the Phoenix area. One of Clyde’s new biker names was “Bad to the Bone.”

I laughed when Clyde told me about his new name, because I thought that he was way too sweet to have a name like Bad to the Bone. In my opinion, anyone who would serve on several church boards, help me teach confirmation and sleep on a gym floor, and take off his tie and unplug a stopped toilet on a Sunday morning was “Good as Gold,” not “Bad to the Bone.” Nevertheless, the name stuck, and it was even included in a video that was created by one of his biker friends for his funeral in Phoenix on April 1, and his memorial here at Eden on April 10.¹

II

As we ponder today’s scripture reading, I wonder how many of us can relate to Saul’s experience of turning a one-eighty. I wonder how many of us have done a complete turnaround in our lives.

My friend Chris is a guy who did a one-eighty after a serious motorcycle accident several years ago. Chris was hit by the driver of an automobile who essentially pushed him off the road, because the driver didn’t see him. Chris ended up in the ditch with multiple bone fractures, a concussion, and some internal injuries. He spent the next several months in a series of medical facilities recovering from his injuries, and was eventually discharged but continued in outpatient physical therapy for over a year. Chris explained to me that he essentially had to learn to walk again, and according to him, it was a miracle that he did.

Chris told me that the bike accident changed his life. I asked, “How so?”

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvYrAlw1Hg>

Chris said that prior to the accident he had spent a lot of his life feeling sorry for himself, on account of a number of things that had happened to him that were out of his control. He was born into a poor family. His father abandoned him and his mother when he was an infant. And he grew up as the only Asian-African American in his neighborhood and school. He said that a lot of the other kids teased him, because he looked different from them. So, he grew up with a chip on his shoulder; but he got a real attitude adjustment lying in the hospital and going through rehab.

Chris said that he realized that feeling sorry for himself wouldn't help him walk again, that a lot of undeserved, unfortunate things happened to a lot of people, and that his future depended less on what others had or hadn't done for him, and a whole lot more on how he responded to the circumstances in his past, including the motorcycle accident.

Not everyone has the resolve or courage that my friend Chris demonstrated, but those who do—those who find the strength to focus on the things that they can control, and who embrace a survivor mentality in life—can enjoy very different futures than those who cling to a victim identity.

III

One doesn't have to have been thrown off of a horse or a motorcycle to have had a significant life-changing experience. Some people identify with Saul in other ways. They identify with his life changing religious conversion experience.

Many who come to the faith later in life or who have reclaimed the faith of their childhoods as adults, in my experience, have described Damascus Road-type conversion experiences similar to Saul's in Acts 9.

For example, I met several second-career students in my seminary days years ago, who described their calls to ministry much like Saul described his conversion experience. One man, Keith, in particular described how he had worked hard in his previous career, and built up a successful business. But in the end, the work and the product of his toil didn't seem worthwhile, because he no longer found meaning in the products that his business produced or the accumulation of wealth. He wanted to feel that what he did made more of a difference in society. So he threw in the towel on corporate America, and went to seminary to become a parish minister. (Personally, I don't think one has to give up a business career to have a meaningful life, but that's how my classmate framed his situation.)

So, some of us have had Damascus Road-type experiences and embraced and lived changed lives, like my friend Chris, who survived the motorcycle accident, and my fellow classmate, Keith, who changed vocations. Other people change for different reasons. Some, for example, change for love.

Perhaps you have known people, who have buckled down and gotten remarkably responsible after getting married or having children and realizing that they were responsi-

ble for someone besides themselves. Similarly, some have turned their lives around for love, by giving up a vice like cigarettes or booze. Or maybe they (maybe you) turned your life around by “coming out of the closet,” once you fell in love with a person of the same gender. There are many ways and reasons for turning one’s life around. Doing a one-eighty for love is another.

IV

A further kind of change that folks may experience in life is the kind of change demonstrated by Ananias. The Apostle Ananias’ changed his perception of Saul in Acts 9.

Ananias was an apostle who lived in Damascus and who had heard about Saul, largely through the grapevine, and he, like most of the other apostles, was terrified of the man, because he knew that Saul had persecuted and imprisoned followers of Christ. Ananias doubted that Saul could ever change. But he (Ananias) was converted too. Ananias did a one-eighty. God spoke to him in a vision, in Acts 9, and told him to get up and go to the house of Judas on Main Street in Damascus, to ask for Saul, and to tell Saul that he was the one whom he had been told would heal him.

Ananias recited to God the terrible things that he had heard about Saul. God listened to Ananias’ concerns, and then said to him essentially, “Go anyway.” And Ananias did. He went and entered the house. Ananias laid hands on Saul and, according to the historian Luke, immediately something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and his sight was restored. Then Saul got up and was baptized. He ate and regained his strength. And for several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and he began proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God.

So in the end, both Saul and Ananias were radically changed. Both men did a one-eighty. Saul switched from being an enemy of the gospel to being a leading apostle, and Ananias went from being terrified of Saul and doubting that change was possible, to becoming the instrument of Saul’s healing and the one who ordained him to his new calling.

There you have it—two people totally changed. Who would have believed it? Perhaps no one, perhaps not even Saul or Ananias themselves. And yet, the scriptures remind us that God is full of surprises, that change is possible, and that change can begin with us.

I wonder, “What needs changing in your life today? Are you due for a spiritual change, a behavioral change, or a change in perception about yourself or someone else? How do answer these questions? Do you say, “A,” “B,” “C,” or “D, all of the above?”

Regardless of your situation, regardless of which answer you resonate with, the good news is that change is truly possible in the eyes of God. Change can begin right here, and right now. The only requirement for a one-eighty is that we be open to it. That’s the truth of Saul’s testimony. That’s the truth of Ananias’ example. That’s the truth of the

gospel. Are you open to change? Are you open to the work of the Spirit in your life? If so, let the change begin. Amen.