

Oct 2nd 2022

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

CONVERSION

Acts 9 ***“The Story of The Conversion of Saul”***

Meanwhile, Saul, still breathing threats of murder against Jesus' disciples, went to the high priest to receive certification to the synagogue of Damascus that he was empowered to track down all people of “The Way” and forcibly bring them back to Jerusalem. But on his way to Damascus, suddenly a blinding light flashed from heaven. He fell to the ground and heard a voice, saying ‘Saul, Saul, who do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you that you know my name?’ cried Saul. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city and you will be told what to do.’ So Saul and his fellow travelers went on leading Saul because he had been blinded. For three days he could not see and did not eat or drink.

Now in Damascus, the Lord came to a disciple named Ananias in a vision. ‘Here am I’ said Ananias. And the Lord said, ‘Go to a street named Straight, to the house of Judas (not the same as the betrayer) and find a man named Saul. Lay your hands upon him and heal his blindness.’ But Ananias argued, ‘Lord, I have heard many evil things about this man and the horrible things he has done to your saints...’ But the Lord said, ‘Go. He is to be one of my instruments unto the Gentiles as well as before the people of Israel.

So Ananias went and found Saul. ‘Brother Saul’ he said, ‘The lord Jesus who appeared to you has sent me to heal your blindness and fill you with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored and he repented and was baptized and regained his strength.

Changing Seasons

*Life unfolds by seasons
as wisely God arranged.
Time for rhymes and reasons
and most of all for change.*

*Like the changing autumn leaves
become God's art robust.
Nature's vibrant tapestries
until they turn to rust.*

*On God's great loom of Being
One thread of truth runs pure.
In all of Life's sight-seeing,
only Change is sure. (JHG)*

Hints of the changing seasons are popping out around us.
One tree turns color. Then the whole grove.
Then an entire mountainside becomes a foliage collage
and sight-seers flock to New England
to enjoy this lovely change,
only to return home to their lives of sameness.

Most of us are conflicted about change.
On the one hand, change is built into the flow of life,
right down to our molecules.
Of all God's creatures, we humans are the most
adaptable to change and yet so often fight it.

We buy insurance policies to maintain our life styles.
The sale of security systems has ski-rocketed.
And we do our best to avoid physical change.
As my physical therapist preaches to me,
**“Jim, you’re gonna have to learn
that you must do everything you can
just to keep what you have and stay where you are.”**

For many, even the church has become a way
to conquer change.

Many use their Christianity to confirm their politics
rather than change them.

Author and theologian, Brian McLaren, in his book
Everything Must Change says,

**“Status quo Christianity has traded the revolutionary
story of Jesus for familiar cliches, pat answers and
a domesticated God.”**

But the truth is - ours is a God of Change.

And because, for human beings, change is a choice,
Jesus came to help us make good and faithful choices.
And no story in the entire New Testament
more dramatically highlights HOW we must change,
than the story of THE CONVERSION OF SAUL.

In this great story, the characters of Saul and Ananais
help identify 2 key ways we are called to change
so as NOT to persecute Jesus.

The 1st kind of change is hinted here:

Meanwhile, Saul, still uttering threats of murder against Jesus' disciples, went to the high priest to receive certification to the synagogue of Damascus

The Greek word for “uttering threats” isn’t really about speaking - it’s the word for “inhaling”. In other words, as much as Saul - soon to become Paul - is bellowing threats he is also breathing in the energy of hatred and anger that encourage them. The spiritual atmosphere that Paul breathes is toxic to Jesus and therefore must change.

We too live in a time of toxic air & atmosphere to Jesus. Although it’s more a matter of air-waves, not actual air. In the television we watch, the internet we access, the chat-rooms we inhabit, the philosophies we espouse and pass on, the friendships we encourage, we create and perpetuate poison atmospheres to Jesus.

At the beginning of the pandemic I wrote a poem that describes precisely what fed Saul’s persecution of Jesus.

**Cover your mouth in this season of flu.
Contagions of sickness can happen to you.
Evil loves spewing it’s hatred and dread
like bio-infections searching to spread.
Twitter and Facebook, creating a tide.**

Websites conspire with no place to hide.
Just like Corona, Ebola and A.I.D.s
Vicious goes viral these internet days.
And each single person connected to most
can act as a carrier, live like a host.
No one is neutral, so think in your mind,
“How am I viral? Wicked or Kind?”

A 2nd way Christians should change is hinted here:

Now in Damascus, the Lord came to a disciple named Ananias in a vision. 'Here am I' said Ananias. And the Lord said, 'Go to a street named Straight, to the house of Judas (not the same as the betrayer) and find a man named Saul. Lay your hands upon him and heal his blindness.' But Ananias argued, 'Lord, I have heard many evil things about this man and the horrible things he has done to your saints...' But the Lord said, 'Go. He is to be one of my instruments unto the Gentiles as well as before the people of Israel.

One thing is clear in this divided world of our's

- all of us have been doing a lot of assuming.

And what's interesting about this morning's story
is that the greatest assumer is Ananais -
a DISCIPLE of Jesus - not an adversary!

Knowing Jesus does not immunize anyone
from needing to change.

Because, quite often, the worst kind of assuming
is the self-righteousness kind!

With the proclamation on lips, “Jesus is my Lord & Savior”
some awfully Un-Christian things have happened.

Righteousness breeds certainty!

For years, one of my favorite metaphors for preaching & teaching was the example about the frog in hot water.

I used it very self-righteously as a great example of what happens when we refuse to change.

It goes like this: if a frog is put in boiling water it will immediately jump out to save itself.

But, if a frog is put in cool water & slowly boiled, it will boil to death.

I was so self-righteous about this because I was so certain it was true.

I was so certain that it was certifiable scientific fact.

So imagine how crushed I was just a couple weeks ago, when a scientist debunked my precious metaphor and revealed that frogs in BOTH situations would jump out and save themselves.

I didn't think I was assuming anything.

I thought it was true -

which is the worst kind of assumption of all!

But the scales fell from my eyes and I realized the truth.

The story of the Conversion of Saul suggests that our assuming must change.

In closing,

I wonder how many of us come to church
thinking we must change.

I wonder how many of us think we are blind?

Maybe, dear friends, our desire to stay the same
is the beginning of the persecution of Jesus.

In these threatening times in which we live,

Jesus calls us to change our atmospheres & assumptions
in order to overcome our blindness and see the light.

Prayer of Pastoral Care Oct 2, 2022 World Communion Sunday

The Psalmist reminds us, "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'" Our prayer response is:
God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Faithful Lord, present in sorrow, present in hope, allow our lament & times of grieving to open us up with space to seek you. May we never forget that your steadfast love never ceases and your Spirit forever flows. God of grace and God of glory, you care for the whole earth. Be with all survivors of hurricane Fiona still recovering in Puerto Rico, and this week's devastating hurricane Ian in Florida, and for people in South Carolina and beyond. We thank you for all who helped with rescue during the storm. Guide us as we care for the earth, and all humans and creatures therein. God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We bring before you the cares of the world. We pray for people enduring the devastation of war in Ukraine, and continuing violence against women, especially in Iran and Afghanistan. Be with any marginalized people who fear for their safety. We pray for cities and public life that have suffered destruction and ruin. Bring restoration, we pray, and an end to conflicts that divide and destroy.
God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for nations and peoples undergoing turmoil and struggle. On this World Communion Sunday, may our celebration here not shield us from the truth that many Christians struggle in their lives, both as individuals and communities of faith. We thank you we can come to the Table with the cares and sorrows of this world. We praise you, O God, not from a position of strength and power, but from the broken edges of our lives. May we find that our fears are relieved as we share the bread and the cup around the world.
God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We now lift before you those on this church's crisis prayer list. In gratitude for the bread and cup we will share, may we honor you by sharing our bread with others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

OFFERING

The Lord is our portion. Therefore, let us have hope as we bring our gifts to God.

*DOXOLOGY & PRAYER

Lord, your steadfast love never ceases; your mercies never come to an end. Use these gifts, we pray, that through them your compassion may be known. We offer this dedication of our offering in Jesus' name. Amen.