

Matthew 10:16-22
Feast of the Conversion of Paul | January 25th, 2017
The Rev. John Forman

In the early days of the 1600s, Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi hired a young Renaissance artist named Michelangelo da Caravaggio to create two paintings of the story that Paul tells King Agrippa in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we just heard. The story in which Paul describes converting not from Judaism to Christianity, but converting from a Jewish Roman who hunted Christians into a Jewish Roman who testified to the Gentiles that, through Christ, they were God's children also.

The first painting Caravaggio created is violent and frantic. A nearly naked Paul, who has just fallen from his horse, sprawls on the ground holding his hands over his face to block the intense white light blinding him. In the upper right corner of the painting, an angel holds Jesus who is leaning down towards Paul with his arms outstretched out in pleading. A soldier standing behind Paul tries to control Paul's now riderless horse, and aims a spear at Jesus and the angel to protect the fallen Paul.

The second painting that Caravaggio completed a year later, is vastly different. As in the first painting, Paul lies on the ground, but now an attendant gently holds the bridle of a calm horse who seems to be trying to avoid stepping on Paul. This is the version on the front of your bulletin. No soldier, no angel, no Jesus. The attendant, the horse and our own attention are all focused on Paul. In this painting, Paul is not trying to shield himself from a harsh blinding light, but rather lies in a warmer, more diffuse light with his eyes closed, his arms outstretched in what looks like ecstasy, seemingly ready to embrace something or someone who has captivated him.

I appreciate both of Caravaggio's paintings because they capture two common types of life-changing experiences. I have had both. Life has knocked me upside the head and left me scrambling on the floor and blinded until someone or something could guide me toward a more life-affirming direction. But more often than not, my life has been nudged rather than shoved. Faint shimmers or warm radiances have coaxed me far more frequently than voices from heaven or blasts of dazzling light.

Maybe you know one of these better than the other or perhaps you too have encountered both. Maybe life has knocked you so hard that you feel to the ground in confusion and tried to cover your eyes to protect them from seeing the presence of the dread holy one. Current political realities

have done just that for many of us. We live in a time when just to be going in a direction unconsciously is to risk being surprised and thrown. So many of our unexamined assumptions about the way we live and our effect on others are being challenged.

A friend of mine, a Canadian Bishop, has pointed out that we can no longer assume that pursuing narrow political interests will have no effect on the world. We can no longer assume that the resource-consuming way that most of us live our lives doesn't affect others. We can no longer assume that the earth itself, its climate and its habitats will function as though they are impervious to what we do. We have discovered that if we continue to be propelled forward by unexplored conscious assumptions, we will be knocked off the horse we're riding with some frequency, only to find ourselves flat on our backs on the ground.

And then there's Caravaggio's second painting—the one with Saul on his back bathed in a warm light with his arms stretched out toward whatever or whoever it is that has captivated his heart and filled him with joy. Because this is the other type of conversion experience and this can be the consequence of the first, more violent, kind of experience.

Whether we are knocked off a death-dealing path gradually or all at once, either way, we can choose to return to the more life-affirming paths of God. Whether we are knocked forcefully or gently off a path that is personal, vocational, societal or global, the result can return us into the arms of God and, in some way, return us to the path toward our deepest, truest selves.

To fully understand how this happened for Paul and to find some life-lessons for ourselves, we need to hear what Paul wrote to the Galatians. In his letter, Paul describes how the same God who corrected him – the God who revealed the risen and ascended Christ to Paul – is the same God who had set him apart before he was born. In other words, Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus Road did not convert him from an oppressor to a believer, from a demon to an angel. Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus woke him up to the identity and vocation that God had implanted in him from the beginning, from the womb.

On Sunday, we'll hold our annual meeting. As a parish that has nearly doubled in size in less than three years, we have had some moments of turbulence and we will have more. Mostly, I am happy to say,

we have been and will continue to be nudged and coaxed. In either case, we will need to stay open to God's yearning for what this parish is meant to be as a community of God's children. We can also learn to be prayerfully open in our on-going discernment or rediscovery of who each of us as individuals is most meant to be, from our deepest and most holy origins.

The Camaldolese Benedictine monk, Fr. Bede Griffiths, wrote a beautiful poem that I pass along as a source of encouragement to help live into these kinds of transitional moments, whether they are gentle or more turbulent. In his poem, "Awakening," he writes:

"To discover God
is not to discover an idea
but to discover oneself.

It is to awaken
to that part of one's existence
which has been hidden from sight
and which one has refused to recognize.

The discovery may be very painful;
it is like going through
a kind of death.

But it is the one thing
Which makes life
Worth living.¹"

¹ Griffiths, Bede. *The Golden String: An Autobiography*. Tucson, AZ: Medio Media, 2003.