

Acts 9:1-20 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” ¹³But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

Philippians 3:4b-14 If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised 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; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have

already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

In seeing how God changes Saul/Paul over time, we recognize our own increased desire to be used by God as we grow in faith. There is a subsequent growth by the Holy Spirit in all kinds of generosity towards others.

Over and over in scripture, God calls people from where they are to where God needs and wants them to be. They grow in faith and trust. Remember God's conversation with Moses at the burning bush? God knew Moses had killed a man. Yet God called Moses to eventually lead God's people, the Israelites out of oppression under Pharaoh's rule.

Remember Jonah? Jonah first ran from God by hopping a boat going in the opposite direction from where God asked Jonah to go. After being thrown up by a giant fish, Jonah relents and goes to preach to the people of Ninevah. Even when he's griping in the last verses, God is growing him.

Scriptures show us very real people – people just like us – and their transformation under God's power. Why is it that we carry this myth that we have to be perfect first in order to be used by God? If that is a myth you live with, listen closely. God grows us into the people God needs us to be. It's a journey. Most often the journey of a lifetime.

Today's scriptures tell us the story of Saul. We begin in the first lesson in the book of Acts. Saul is persecuting people who've begun following Jesus Christ. He is finding them and hauling them off to Jerusalem. A faithful Jewish Pharisee, Saul doesn't accept the teachings of Jesus. With eagerness to keep the faith pure, he is zealous in the pursuit of Jews who have strayed. Fear and power motivate his actions. But God has another life in store for Saul. He is about to experience the living Lord.

On the way to Damascus, he is blinded. Jesus speaks to him and his companions. "Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus."

Saul is blinded and doesn't eat or drink for three days.

You and I can perhaps relate better to another character in Saul's conversion story. Ananias. Ananias experiences a vision; a dream. The Lord instructs him to go to Saul and pray over him. Now Ananias has heard of all the nasty things Saul is doing to Christians. He must take a leap of faith to follow Jesus' instructions. Fearing for his own life, Ananias, follows the Lord's command and goes to the place where Saul is staying. He prays over Saul. Without Ananias trust in God, Saul would have continued blind and the world would have missed a great apostle.

As Ananias is praying, Saul's sight returns. He is baptized and begins preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is Lord. Talk about a transformation! Talk about God forming and

making this man into something new; an instrument for the Gospel. It's a good thing that Saul doesn't know what's coming. He might have run the other way.

No one is out of reach of God's love, mercy and transforming power. Through the Holy Spirit's power, we all grow up, grow in, grow deeper in faith as the years go by. James Fowler, United Methodist Minister, wrote a book titled: "Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning." He marks six stages of faith development. In early childhood, Bible stories are taken literally, and God is like a parent figure. As we grow, we imitate religious beliefs and actions of others. Then we begin to take responsibility for our own faith. Gradually opposing viewpoints are accepted and examined. Finally, we become aware of our own finiteness and incorporate a sense of oneness with the Almighty.

The Holy Spirit calls us and woos us into an ever deepening relationship with God. No one is out of reach of God's love and transforming power. This is clearly evident in the second lesson for today. Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. Saul, after his conversion received a new name. Paul. Most of our letters in the New Testament are written by Paul.

In these verses, it almost sounds like a lover describing his experience with his beloved. Paul leaves his old life behind. He longs to know only Christ. He wants to become like Christ and share in all Christ's sufferings. When we are wedded to another, we too, desire to know everything we can about that person. We long to be with them and spend more and more time with them. Love (at least initially) blinds us to the sufferings that come with being joined to another. 'Nothing matters, dear, as long as I can be with you!' Paul's words sound like this. How far has he come since his days as Saul the persecutor of the church.

Augustine of Hippo once wrote: To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek Him the greatest adventure; to find Him, the greatest human achievement.

In the stories of Saul turned Paul, we see how God again used a very imperfect human to advance the Good News of Jesus. No one is outside the reach of God's love and mercy to grow them into new lives. It might be too late for a different ending, but with the Holy Spirit it is never too late for a new beginning.

So how does growth connect with generosity?

As I share a memory from my early Sunday School years, see if it rings true with you. I can still remember the smell of my church basement classrooms. I can still feel the hard chairs we sat in. I remember putting my couple of coins into a little plastic white church each Sunday. That was the offering container. I listened for the clink as they dropped. At that stage of faith, I was imitating adults actions in church. Give some money to God.

Now some fifty years later, I understand that offerings to God include much more than a couple of nickels or a quarter each week. We have to begin somewhere!

We recognize that generosity includes generosity of spirit; helping a pregnant woman with a screaming toddler put groceries in her car. Generosity includes advocacy for those who wish to

become citizens of our country. (Like our Afghan refugee who shared with us.) Generosity covers a largess of spirit to forgive those who hurt us. We're generous when we care for God's creation so that next generations will have a beautiful planet to live in. Just as the Holy Spirit nurtures faith within us, so too, the Holy Spirit nurtures generosity and its scope in our lives.

Perhaps for you it didn't begin with Sunday school offering. Maybe you saw your parents taking food to the food bank. Whatever it was, notice how your own understanding of generosity has grown and changed over time. Generosity is not only about money. God called Paul to share his time, his passion, his skills in spreading the Gospel. Paul learned to be generous as he was enchained in prison, and shipwrecked at sea.

Thus we end with two questions. How are you growing in faith right now, if at all? How are you growing in learning to be generous? God can help you figure it out! Amen.