

(07-14-24) A New Beginning (2)

Transformation

Acts 9:1-22

As we take our faith journey together, four important words should be in mind: **Grace, Transformation, Missions, and the Kingdom of God**. Today, let us consider the word “transformation.”

I'd like to open my sermon with this question, “**What is the purpose of our lives?**” Can you define the purpose of our lives in a single word?

Let us read Colossians 1:16 together. “**For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible ... everything got started in him [God] and finds its purpose in him [God].**” (Colossians 1:16 Message). It must start with God to find the purpose of our lives. Even Bertrand Russell, who is many Christians' favorite atheist, said, “**Unless you assume a God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless.**” So, we must find the purpose of our lives in God's word.

Let me ask you the question again, “**What is the purpose of our lives?**” or “**What is the meaning of life?**” It is our transformation. “**For this is the will of God, your sanctification ... For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.**” (1 Thessalonians 4:3 & 7-8 NRSV).

Our transformation is God's will toward our lives. According to John Wesley, the purpose of our lives is our **entire sanctification**, or **Christian perfection**. **Then what is Christian perfection (or entire sanctification)? It is the purity of our intention, dedicating all our life to God. Christian perfection is an ongoing process of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ as we obey the Greatest Command, love God and love our neighbors to the exclusion of sin. Because God's will for us is our transformation, God is working on us to be transformed and sanctified to be more and more like Jesus Christ. God's nudging is constant in our lives, leading us to commit our lives fully to God and resemble His Son, Jesus.**

What about Apostle Paul? Today's Scripture, Acts 9, is about Paul's transformation, sanctification, or conversion story. Please know that 30% of Christians experience radical conversion like Apostle Paul in today's Scripture. About 70% of Christians experience gradual conversion in their lives. They can't pinpoint the time of their conversion, but as they attended worship and have been involved in missions and ministries at their church, they gradually transformed into believers in Jesus.

In today's Scripture, we can find Apostle Paul's four encounters as he experienced God's special grace in Jesus Christ. I strongly believe that these four encounters can happen to us as we are transformed or sanctified by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

First of all, Paul encountered Jesus Christ.

This means that Paul met God's forgiving grace through Jesus Christ.

“Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9:3-5 NRSV)

Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest the Christians there and to bring them back to Jerusalem. He was obsessed with a murderous spirit, and he was involved in killing one of the seven deacons chosen to serve in the early church, Stephen (Acts 7:58; 8:1). He was a persecutor of Christians. He was an enemy of the early churches. Let me remind you of the meaning of grace from last Sunday's sermon. **“Grace is the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit. Grace is God's presence to create, heal, forgive, reconcile, and transform human hearts, communities, and the entire creation.”**

Paul's encounter with Jesus is his encounter with God's presence, which is God's grace to heal, forgive, reconcile, and transform Paul's heart. In the book of Acts, we can find Apostle Paul's conversion story on the Damascus Road three times, Acts 9:1-21, 22:6-21, and 26:12-18. In Acts 22, he talked to the Jewish audience in Jerusalem about his conversion story. In Acts 26, he shared the story with King Agrippa. Due to the unforgettable and deeply embedded experience of God's forgiving grace, Paul could not help but share his conversion story with people wherever he went. Each one of us has a story of encountering God's forgiving grace. Please share the story with your children and grandchildren and with the people in your lives.

Secondly, Paul encountered himself.

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9:4b-5 NRSV)

In God's grace, Paul could understand who he really was. He thought he was doing the good work to glorify God as a passionate Pharisee. He couldn't tolerate Christians who followed the Way of Jesus. For him, Jesus was not the Christ. He was ready to do anything to stop spreading the heretic Christian teachings on Jesus, even killing the Christians. But Jesus said, **“Why do you persecute me? I am Jesus, who you are persecuting.”** Paul was a persecutor of Jesus Christ

because Jesus Christ identified himself with his church. That is true to the church even today.

When we encounter Jesus, we can come to a real understanding of who we are in his grace. Sometimes, we misunderstand ourselves because of the sins in our hearts. Even other people's perspectives on us are not right. Only when we encounter God's grace in Jesus Christ can we see who we are and our deep motivations for doing what we are trying to do. I hope and pray that we all have this kind of transformational and sanctifying experience throughout our lives.

Thirdly, Paul encountered his call for the Gentiles.

Ananias delivered to Paul God's message of his missions. "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:15-16 NRSV).

Our encounter with God's grace always requires us to live a responsible life. For Methodists, we do not call grace just grace. But we call grace responsible grace. While grace is freely given, we have the responsibility to respond to grace. This involves an active responsible life through good works, spiritual disciplines, and a commitment to living a holy life.

Last but not least, Paul encountered a new church in his life.

"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." (Acts 9:19-20 NRSV)

God did not send Paul to the mission fields right away. After his conversion, Paul was led to a Christian community in Damascus. It was his first time to have fellowship and learn about Jesus Christ from the disciples there. He came to understand the meaning of the church. Later, he met the disciples in Jerusalem and built up his relationship with them. The church in Antioch sent him as a missionary to the Gentile world.

Apostle Paul's transformation or sanctification was not possible without his involvement in the churches. To grow to be more like Jesus Christ, to be sanctified, and to live a life of holiness, we need our church, Carleton United Methodist Church.

As we take a faith journey together, we must remember that we are called to be transformed so that we can more deeply love our God and our neighbors. To do so, we need one another. We need to be involved in our church family's lives together. By doing so, we can achieve the entire sanctification.