

"Be What You Are Made To Be"  
Romans 12:1-8  
August 23, 2020  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

If you were to make a reality tv show based on the life of the Apostle Paul, it would be called, "Extreme Makeover: Damascus Edition." Most of the people we read about in

scripture are good candidates for makeovers- that's why God chooses them in the first place. But Saul of Tarsus was without a doubt, the most extreme. The first time we see his name in the New Testament is in Acts chapter seven where he is calmly watching the stoning of a committed young Christian named Stephen. The text says, rather ominously, that he approved of the murder.

Just a few verses later, Saul is ravaging the church, dragging men and women out of their homes and throwing them into prison. Their crime: believing that Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Christ, is the son of God, the Messiah.

Saul was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, an expert on the religious law. He was a rabid opponent of the young church and did all he could to keep the message about Jesus Christ out of the synagogues and away from the Jews. He used any means necessary, including violence, to ensure that God was not dishonored by, what he considered to be, false teachings.

For Saul, Jews who believed this nonsense about Jesus were dangerous because they were polluting the faith by leading fellow Jews away from loyalty to the one true God. He believed that God's salvation and redemption of the chosen people would happen only when they followed every single letter of the law. He was going to make sure they did, even if it killed them.

Saul's extreme makeover happened on the road to Damascus. Persecution of certain Jews in Jerusalem forced them to flee the country and they ended up in Syria. Saul was determined to chase them down.

The book of Acts describes him as "*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*" He was a man on a mission and nothing and no one was going to get in his way.

Until someone did. In an abrupt and surprising encounter, he met Jesus. Author Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "*I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.*" Someone as determined and aggressive as Saul needed something big to get his attention.

A flash of light knocked him to the ground, and he heard a voice ask, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul responded, "Sir, who are you?" And then came the bombshell, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

I'll bet Saul never saw that coming. He had caused a lot of pain and suffering in the church but instead of zapping him with a lightning bolt, Jesus told him to go and wait in Damascus. When he got up he realized that he was totally and completely blind. He was helpless. His friends took him into Damascus where he waited for three days without eating or drinking.

While this was happening a devout follower of Jesus, a disciple named Ananias, was minding his own business at home in Damascus when he too had a visit from Jesus. He recognized Jesus' voice right away and said, "Here I am, Lord. Just tell me what you want me to do and I will do it." When Jesus told him he said, "Anything but that!"

He couldn't believe that Jesus would ask him to go visit Saul- that would be suicide! But Jesus said, "Go!" So he did. Ananias couldn't believe that of all the people in the world Saul was the chosen instrument, the one who would tell the Gentiles, kings, and even the Jews all about Jesus. The most vicious enemy of the church would become its most enthusiastic voice. Unbelievable!

Saul's sight was restored (in more ways than one), he was baptized, and welcomed into the community of believers in Damascus. The very group of people he was on his way to destroy are now the ones who welcome and care for him.

His extreme makeover was made public when Saul began preaching about Jesus in the synagogue, saying, "He is the Son of God." People were stunned when they heard him. "Isn't this the guy who was wreaking havoc on the Jesus followers in Jerusalem?" This wasn't just a makeover, it was a transformation miracle!

Later in Acts we find that Saul is now called Paul, going from a Hebrew name to a Greek one. His transformation was not the result of religious law, teaching, or doctrine, or even a good sermon. His conversion came through a personal encounter with the Risen Christ. Jesus called him by name and commissioned him to a dangerous and complex ministry which would last for another twenty-five years. Paul continued to live as a devout Jew who never turned away from his loyalty to the God of his ancestors.

Through his transformation, he grasped the truth:

*"The one true God was now made known in Jesus. And grasping that, he knew that he was himself grasped, held, sustained, and saved by the faithful love of the faithful God. Being so grasped, he found himself a 'servant of Christ, set apart for God's gospel'; in proclaiming the gospel, he discovered again and again that it was indeed God's power for salvation." (1)*

Saul thought he knew who he was and what he was supposed to do with his life but a personal encounter with the Risen Christ changed everything. That's important to remember as we venture into his letter to the Christians living in Rome. Theologian N. T. Wright believes that *"Romans is Paul's masterpiece because it covers many different topics from many different angles, bringing them all together into a fast-moving and compelling line of thought. Romans is all about the God who unveils divine power and grace through the good news about Jesus. Paul insists that this power and grace are available for everyone who believes."* (2)

Paul probably wrote this letter while he was in Corinth around 57 CE. He sent it to people he had not yet met in person but was looking forward to seeing in the near future. His plan was to go to Jerusalem to deliver an offering from Gentile Christians to needy Jewish Christians and then go to Rome where he would plan his new mission journey to Spain.

The recipients of this letter had only this letter. They didn't have any other New Testament writings. They did, however, know the story of Jesus Christ and his ministry, death, and resurrection. Paul didn't have to explain the basics to these seasoned Christians. What he did was explain why it mattered to those living in Rome. The overarching theme of this letter, which was probably his last, is to make it clear that the universal sinfulness of humanity has been met by the gracious act of God in Christ. And that grace includes everyone.

Paul did not plant the house churches in Rome. Although the people would have heard of him, this is his first letter to them. The Christian community included both Jews and Gentiles who were living right in the center of the Imperial Roman Empire. They were confronted every day with the soldiers of the emperor, with his image on their coins, and his demands echoing in their ears. Every time they prayed to God or invoked the name of Jesus Christ as Lord, they were committing acts of treason right under the emperor's nose. It was a dangerous place to be a Christian which makes this letter all the more important. Paul wrote to remind them that nothing can separate them from the love of God through Jesus Christ.

Paul's letter to the Romans was a pastoral letter- he wanted to remind them of God's story in such a way that they could see how their own stories might fit into what God had done and was doing. He wanted them to see their own role in the story that God was still writing. He wanted them to experience the transformative power of Christ the way he had. This letter is an affirmation of who they are as well as a call to be who they were created to be.

*" So, here is what I want you to do," he writes. "I want you to offer your ordinary, everyday life to God as an offering."*

Paul reminds them that their everyday life is worthy of God. Everything they do can be a testimony to their faith in God and the ways in which God has acted in their lives. They don't have to be an Apostle traveling around the world, getting arrested, and planting churches- that is Paul's story. Their story is to live their best lives as Christ's people in that particular place at that particular time. They are called to be people transformed by grace, love, and mercy.

For Paul, the Christian faith is not simply another religious practice to be taken up and carried out alongside other commitments. The gospel shatters the lives of those whom it touches. Once you meet Jesus Christ your whole life centers around him- everything- your sleeping, eating, going to work, walking around life- everything you do and are is an offering to God. Not only are individual lives transformed by Christ but so is the community. Paul is well known for his metaphor of the church as the human body with many different parts that all fit together.

He reminds the Romans that they are to celebrate their inclusion in this body that brings together such different people who are *" fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts."* (*The Message*)

Those who take the message of Christ seriously can't help but be transformed. Rather than conforming to the "emperor- worshiping" world around them, the Romans are called to live as those transformed in mind and body. I doubt that kind of transformation was any easier for the Romans than it is for us today. It is usually simpler to just blend into the culture, to think, act, and talk like everyone else. But transformation isn't optional for followers of Jesus. We cannot be committed Christians and still conform to the world around us.

I am not saying that everything in the world is bad or evil, it isn't. I am saying that often the values, priorities, and goals of Christ differ greatly from the society in which we live. We are called to be "counter-cultural.

*Frank Crouch writes, "In the U.S., we live in a culture that inundates us with advertising designed to keep us conformed to this world. The marketing/media industry spends billions of dollars annually to flood televisions, websites, billboards, emails, and regular mail. They intrude even onto gas pump screens. They seek to define us essentially as consumers, individual economic units existing for the sake of larger market shares. In addition, each day our families, friends, organizations, religions, political parties, and society at large pressure us to fit in, to be like them, to stay within the boundaries of tradition, custom, or practice that mark who we are 'supposed' to be.*

*Not being conformed to this world is a tall order. The world will fight at every stage to convince us to look the other way rather than glimpse the injustice, hatred, oppression, immorality, greed, and violence that surround us. It takes transformation, renewal of the mind, to detach ourselves from the world's attempts to occupy us with the things that do not matter."*

As we seek what does matter, what is good and acceptable to God we find that we have no choice but to challenge everything that harms those created in God's image and God's beloved creation. We have no choice but to advocate for all who are marginalized and victimized because of their skin color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, or bank account. We are called to abandon the sin of individualism and embrace life in the beloved community. The way we live our lives in today's world is the clearest witness to what we really believe. What sermon does your life preach?

God made humans to be partners in transforming the world. Transformation and renewal are not one-time events, but an intentional process that will last a lifetime. Richard Rohr reminds us that *"the mystery of transformation often happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart. The pain of something old falling apart- chaos- invites the soul to listen at a deeper level, and sometimes forces the soul to go to a new place.*

*Most of us would never go to new places any other way. Chaos does not feel good and it does not feel like God. Spiritual transformation always includes a disconcerting reorientation. It is always a process of letting go."*

Perhaps you, like me, feel as though you are living in a time of chaos right now with so much uncertainty and fear. It seems as though everything we have always counted on- even the beginning of a new school year and the Post Office- is suddenly not so certain anymore. As Richard Rohr says, transformation means letting go. It opens us to new life, new mission, new challenges, and new understanding. Our transformation as followers of Christ is a journey we travel every single day. What we can be sure of is that the good news of Jesus Christ is a corrective to this 21<sup>st</sup> century chaos because it advocates for the transformation of the entire human family, the entire world. And we are called to be God's instruments in that transformation.

In his book, LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK, Parker Palmer writes, *"Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood."* He quotes writer Frederick Buechner who said that our

vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need. That is what Christ calls us to do; it is who he calls us to be. He calls us to the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created.

Brothers and sisters, we are called to be instruments of change so let's just go ahead and face the chaos. Let us be who and what we were made to be. And let's do it together, as the body of Christ, *excellently formed and marvelously functioning*.

With God's help, may it be so.

Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *WHAT SAINT PAUL REALLY SAID*, N.T. Wright, Fortress Press. 1997. P. 61.
- *PAUL FOR EVERYONE. ROMANS: PART ONE*, N.T. Wright, Westminster John Knox Press. 2004. P. xii.