

Easter 3C John 21: 1-19 Acts 9: 1-20

In the gospel story for this Sunday the disciples had been out doing what they had been doing even before Jesus met them, men who are pursuing the profession of catching fish.

They have been out all night and it has not been very fruitful. And as the first light of dawn appears they are not very far off the beach, but not so far off that they cannot hear a person on the beach call out to them, and when they say they have caught nothing, this person on the beach has a suggestion that they take the nets and drop them over the other side of the boat.

Can you imagine being a professional fisherman and getting advice from someone on the beach that seems to suggest just a few feet over, from one side of the boat to the other, will make all the difference.

I imagine that if I had received that sort of advice I would have grumbled a lot. Perhaps they did as well. But it seems that they did actually lift the nets and cast them down again on the other side,

may be just because, why not. And it said they caught an unimaginable amount of fish.

What is it that changed their perception? Some may say that in those ensuing minutes the sun rose a little brighter. Maybe in that light someone saw an outline of a figure.

But I have a feeling that in the astounding, amazing difference of fishing from one side of the boat to the other, that someone exclaims, “It is the Lord,” and there is that glimmer of recognition.

Breakfast follows on that beach and an opportunity for Peter to acquit himself. “Do you love me,” Jesus asks Peter, three times. And all of this results in a new vocation for Peter, “feed my sheep and follow me.”

And then there is Saul in the Acts of the Apostle lesson this morning out and about doing what he had been doing up and down the land. He has been carrying on with a laser-like focus, not to be denied zeal, breathing threats and murder against the new Jesus followers, ferociously persecuting those of “the Way.”

With the permission of the “high priest’ he is tracking these Jesus followers down to Damascus when his life is lit up with a flash from heaven that temporarily blinds him, knocks him off his horse, and a set of instructions which leads him to find one called
Ananias.

Ananias in turn has been instructed by God to find this notorious Saul, to lay his hand on him so that his sight might be restored. And if that was not a task sufficient, to offer the hospitality of the very Jesus followers that Saul had been on the way to murderously persecute.

This astounding tale ends with Saul’ regaining his sight, being baptized, given a hearty meal, regaining his strength, spending several days with these former enemies now become bosom friends, and heading off into the nearby synagogues telling everyone within earshot that Jesus is the beloved of God.

Fisherman Peter glimpses a mysterious figure on the beach and all of a sudden a life of apostolic leadership stretches out before him.

Zealot Saul struck from his horse and blinded without knowing what happened to him or whose voice he is hearing and is given a vocation that lasts a lifetime.

They were roundly converted! Given a new humanity, a new purpose, a new vocation.

Conversion. What is it about and how does it happen and does it continue to happen again and again?

Allow me to tell you about how it has been for myself.

Identifiably Christian but only nominally so, I began college at my denominational college that was loosely in the evangelical world.

But it was more so characterized by the warm-feeling pietism imported from the Lutheran peasant farmers and shopkeepers and smithies of Sweden who emigrated to the USA to found church and college.

God was in that tradition not angry but full of loving invitation and inclusion.

God was clearly not on my mind and ever so slightly in my heart, but one evening I was invited into a student bible study prayer circle, the kind where separate verses of scripture were mined for

literal and simple meanings, and the prayers were humbly thankful and pleading for the salvation of all.

That evening remains without any hard etched detail of memory.

However, of this I am sure. In the quiet of that circle I was converted to a relationship with God in Jesus. There was no ejection from my chair and no sudden light, but it was an encounter with the love at the center of all things.

I was given new friends and associations, new patterns of prayer and worship, new preferences and behaviors, and eventually a surprising call to ordained service in the church.

I was given the gift of newness of life. I discovered who I was, who I always was and ever would be, a beloved one of God transformed into a friend of God, given a new friendship and a new mission, and eventually a call to ordained ministry.

I was more George Magnuson than I ever had been before. And further, I have at each God moment, each turning or decision point, each new conversion of life, that I have ever become more myself, more of who I actually am in the heart of God, not less so.

And my Episcopal ordination nine years ago was clearly the crowning conversion in my life, made more the self that I was and could fully be.

Jesus seems to be able to draw near to people and then to hear the deep truth of what they have in them to be and to create a set of friendships and invite them into those with other people in a way that makes it possible to hear at last who they really are and to become that person, to live into that more fully.

You could say it is the very center of our faith as Christians that God invites us to become not simply ourselves as good human beings, reasonably decent, moving largely beyond a kind of greed and self preoccupation and infantile possessiveness, moving beyond that toward being the kind of person that others more or less like to have around the place...

but actually inviting us to something we cannot quite yet imagine, into friendship with God, into our divine humanity.

And that invitation to make that quantum leap into our divine humanity, our life and friendship with God, that is not something we could ever achieve. God just gives it to us, because he loves us so much.

God throws a bridge out across time and space, across all the barriers and boundaries and walls we may have erected, and draws us into friendship with God's self.

We can choose some lesser good rather than accept that invitation.

We can try to hide from it or silence it or avoid thinking about what it might mean.

And I think this can be so when we catch just a glimpse of the invitation and perceive that it is so vast, so unimaginable, so wonderful we can hardly begin to conceive of it except in that dark knowing we call faith.

So often it is hard for us to believe this gift of the truth of ourselves through friendship with God, and so we look for more realizable gifts, gifts we can manage and possess; security and possessions, good things that are all generally good, and which never quite fulfill that deep need we have to become who we have in us to be and become.

In Jesus God draws us out of the fearful antagonistic way of thinking that our biological necessity has taught us we call survival

of the fittest, that way that sees how to take things of others and get rid of the people that are weaker than us so that we can survive along with our descendents, and so that we can have more possessions and impose our will on other people. And our world remains so much constructed by that kind of power and domination and fear and cruelty.

But when we accept Jesus' invitation our citizenship is in God, we do not belong to that world, that old ruined empire of sin, of choosing to receive life only so far as we can succeed to grab it and take it for ourselves.

I think this is what Jesus was doing with Peter and Saul, showing them the gift of inexhaustible life that flows beyond all mortal limits. Worth both their living and their dying.

My confused and sometimes scattered mind such as it is, well, it is going to fad away.

But the truth of me, Jesus says, is found in my relationship, that invitation, that calling to be friends with God that God is reaching out to achieve with us in Jesus.

The best way for me to put this, to imagine this, is to think of an actor struggling to become the character that she or he is suppose to be, and try as she may she cannot remove herself, step out of herself and into the character, to put on the identity of the character in the play she must become.

And she stands for hours rather hapless on the stage, until her acting coach tries pointedly to get her to inhabit the character. But she is too scared. "I cannot be her, not really, I don't know how become that person," she says, until one afternoon her coach says to her, "I bet there is a part of you that is full of reckless daring and would like to try some risky things that are sort of exciting." "Well yes, I think I know what you mean, yes, there is a part of me like that."

"Well, let's go to that place in you, let it go, jump into that, put yourself there and let's give it a try."

And it worked, at least sufficiently so that the play goes on to completion.

I think this is at the center of what Jesus is doing in these lessons featuring Peter and Saul who becomes Paul.

He our Author, who knows the deep truth of the character we are created to become, the full promise of who we are, which is hidden in our relationship, our friendship with God and that God is trying to draw us into all the time.

We are so often afraid to risk coming out towards that invitation because of all the hurt and heartbreak and disappointed hopes that have shaped who we are, that makes it hard for us to realize, to realize the life that is flowing to us from beyond simply this mortal life. Life with a capital L.

Yet so long as we aim at maintenance of this present self as we now conceive it we cannot enter the larger selfhood, which is pressing toward us with life.

A self-protective devise of the human spirit, learned over evolutionary time, I suppose. We can use our freedom against the risk of becoming.

However, Jesus accepted our refusals and our fears and in faithful relationship with the One who sent him he struggled to create a little community in which people could learn to try what it would be like to become themselves, relying on the wonderful bridge that God is building across and through the universe, the bridge of friendship with God.

But because our resistance of him is so great, he had to make use even of that very denial, our putting him to death, making even of that the way to be the more himself, to show us that life is more true to itself by giving itself away, and there is only one thing in the whole of the universe that is more itself the more it gives itself away, and that is love.

The answer of the One who loved him and sent him to us, is to show him alive, what we call the Resurrection...to show the whole world and us that love is indeed the truth of his beloved Child.

At Easter and Pentecost Jesus pours out that relationship into his little community the church, he breathes it upon us. And we become the nucleus, the beginning of the recreation of the whole world, changing it from being a body governed by fear and deprivation and anger and mistrust, to a body that is governed and set free by life itself, the very life that is the very meaning of who we each are; the life which is love.

So we can pray that in this season of Easter we will take a chance to sit down with Jesus our acting coach in the drama of our lives as it were, Jesus the mother hen as Luke has it, saying 'look, this is who you really are, this is what you can do, I will do it for you, I will act it out so that you can enter into it, open your arms, don't be afraid, the real truth of who you are is inexhaustible and cannot be overcome.'

With Peter can throw the net over to the other side of our lives. That is what we can pray for this Eastertide, to be converted over and over again, to pray for the Spirit to show us that truth that Jesus dies to make alive in us.

