

“Personal Faith and the Need for Community”

Acts 9:1–20

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

May 1, 2022

Those of us who have written a dissertation at some point try not to download everything we know about some isolated area of study; at least if we have any common sense, we do. Very few people get as excited as we do about some remote tidbit of knowledge. The good news for me and others potentially subjected to my unsolicited rambling is that I wrote on baptism, and as a Christian pastor, I have had plenty of opportunities to share a little bit about the history of the sacred ritual and the teachings that surround it. But there are some themes of this material I have repeated, probably too often for some listeners.

One of these is the tension between personal faith and the need for community. Faith is intensely personal. Especially in Baptist life, we treasure the individual’s need to respond freely to God. It is why we practice believer’s baptism, meaning that the one who is baptized is able to confess faith. But while faith is intensely personal, it must be lived out in community with other believers. We nurture each other, care for each other, challenge and provoke each other. We need each other. We are baptized not only into Christ but into the body of Christ.

So, while we baptize individuals, we baptize them not alone but in the presence of the whole church. Others have played a role in enabling us to know the love of God in Christ, and others will be affected by who we are as followers of Jesus. Faith is intensely personal, but it must be lived out in community, and this has implications not only for baptism but for the whole of Christian life. The familiar story we have read from Acts 9 confirms this reality. Saul of Tarsus, or the Apostle Paul, as we know him, has a deeply personal experience of transformation, but other people are required to help him make sense of it.

We often refer to this story as Paul's conversion experience, but we might better understand this as a story of calling. Paul certainly comes to believe in Jesus, which is a dramatic change, and his view of other believers is transformed. He will no longer see them as evil and persecute them. He will see them as brothers and sisters in faith. Yet, in this time, Paul is transitioning from one kind of Jewish faith to another. He is not being converted as much as he is being called to follow Jesus and proclaim the gospel to all people, including non-Jews, Gentiles.

In Philippians 3, Paul says that he has been a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church. And indeed, when we first encounter him in Acts, we are told that he approves of the killing of Stephen (Acts 8:1). As we join the story today in Acts 9, however, while Luke says Paul is still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, everything changes on the road to Damascus.

A light from heaven flashes around him, not surprisingly he hits the ground, and a voice says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asks who is speaking to him and the voice replies, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men traveling with Paul are speechless because, apparently like him, they hear the voice but see no one. When Paul gets up off the ground, he cannot see at all. So, the men help him get to Damascus where he stays at the house of a man named Judas.

While this is taking place, God tells a man named Ananias to find Saul of Tarsus and lay hands on him so that he can see again. This is clearly a different Ananias than the one in Acts 5 who is struck down when he holds back money from the faith community. We have never used that story for a stewardship theme, thank goodness! But this Ananias, who must live up to his name, which means "Yahweh is gracious," wonders if maybe God is sending him to help the wrong person. I love the honesty of biblical characters, so different from our tendency to be careful with God. "Lord, are you sure? Do you know this guy? He has done a lot of evil to your saints in Jerusalem."

The Lord does not chastise Ananias for questioning the Divine path, but rather assures him that Paul is the instrument chosen to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles. And so, Ananias goes and lays hands on Paul, he regains his sight, is baptized and embraces his calling.

It seems clear that Paul's experience is intensely personal. God in Christ is speaking to him and he is responding personally. He is being singled out, even though he seems an odd choice for this calling. It is a dramatic experience, but we need not be envious of Paul. We experience God in different ways. No one way is better than another. And Paul's experience is dramatic because his previous life is so bad. He has been using his influence to torture and kill Christians! We should be grateful not to repeat his experience! But it is personal, intensely personal.

So is our experience with God and the Risen Christ — at the beginning of our journey, in our baptism, and every step along the way. Paul's experience is not exactly like Peter's in today's reading from John, nor is it exactly like ours, nor should it be. God in Christ relates to each of us as individuals. So, while the basic character of God does not change and thus, there are common aspects of our experience, we each relate to God in our own way.

My experience is unlike many of yours because I did not grow up in church. There are deeply meaningful childhood memories that shape your understanding of God, discipleship and the church that I simply do not have. On the other hand, there is no question in my mind that my faith decisions were mine. There was no one in my household to please by going to church and eventually being baptized. And many of my early faith experiences were very personal — mystical in a way.

I remember praying as a teenager that if all this Jesus stuff was real, and God was real, that I might have some tangible evidence of these realities. Almost immediately I wanted to take back the request, as I thought about what it might be like to have the Creator of the universe

and the Savior of the world show up. Was I up to that? But my hesitation came too late. I had this overwhelming sense that I was not alone. Like Paul and his companions, I didn't see God or Jesus, I didn't even hear a voice, but I felt a presence and a warmth not my own.

I had other experiences like this in times of devotion, while reading scripture, on retreats, in worship. I couldn't prove what I was experiencing to anyone else, but I didn't need to. It was real to me and intensely personal. Like Paul, we each experience the Risen Christ in our own way.

And yet, while it seems clear that Paul's experience is intensely personal, it seems equally clear that he needs other people to help him make sense of it. The men with him on the road to Damascus can confirm that they hear a voice too, and without their help, he might not make it to Damascus. A man named Judas gives him a place to stay. And most of all, Ananias enables him to see again and understand that the God who was in Christ is calling him to service. Without this help, where would Paul be? We might argue that this is how God chooses to reveal things to Paul. Indeed, it is! This is how God chooses to work most of the time — through other people.

But we know this, do we not? We know the value of other people in our lives, how essential they are to our faith. My youth minister was a critical influence in my journey. I had wandered into church as a teenager, partly as an act of rebellion against my family, partly because my next-door neighbor assured me there were good looking girls in the youth group, but mostly because I was seriously interested in exploring the possibility of faith.

Adolescence is a time of spiritual awakening and questioning, sorting out for the first time what we really believe. So, my youth minister, who has remained a thoughtful friend and guide over the years, was an important source of encouragement, as well as someone I could ask any question. But there were also numerous lay leaders in that

church who were critical to my journey, people who took time to get to know me with my long hair and blue jeans, people who came to care about me, people who modeled the way of faith. And later, there were numerous people who confirmed my calling to ministry — in college, during seminary, and in all the churches I have served.

Such helpers do not always simply pat us on the back. Sometimes they have to challenge us to consider some change or perhaps just to stay with the faith or the church in spite of all its flaws. But we all have had people like this in our lives, have we not? Teachers and coaches, ministers and guides, counselors and friends who have kept us on our feet, helped us to see what we were missing, recognized how God was working in our lives even before we did...

This is why we have missed being together so much during the pandemic, why we are thrilled to be back together, why this year's churchwide retreat was so magnificent, even though not everyone could attend. It wasn't just about the leadership, though we deeply appreciate the gratitude many of you have expressed. It was that we enjoy being together because we have so much history, we have meant so much to each other over time and continue to do so. These are the people who taught us as children or who taught our children. These are the people who sat with us in the worst moments of life, cried with us and wrapped their arms around us. These are the people we run to when we experience great and joyous things that have to be shared. We need each other, we depend on each other, we are grateful for each other.

It's why baptism takes place in settings where the whole church is invited, it's why communion is shared with others. Faith is intensely personal, but it is shared with others because we need community. Each of us is a unique beloved child of God, but we are all also part of a family, the Body of Christ, and it is in relationship with our brothers and sisters that we can truly be who we are called to be. Paul learned this on the Damascus Road. We are grateful that we have learned this too.