

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Third Sunday of Easter
10 April 2016

Scripture readings:

Acts 9:1-20 Psalm 30 Revelation 5:11-14 John 21:1-19

It seems to me that 2,000 years ago there were as many problems with nursing homes as there are today. The difference is we tether them with drugs. That may not be the point of today's gospel, but it's at least worth pausing a moment to think about the difficulties of caring for the elderly.

This gospel text has led some people to believe and think that the earliest Eucharists in the Church were celebrated with bread and fish. Shall we try it sometime? *[moans]* Well, you know there are always those who want to go back to the way it was in the original Church, and there were always those who really didn't care too much - like Methodists! *[laughter]* You know about grape juice, don't you? God bless the Methodists. What would we do without you? I've often thought that one of the great missions of the Methodist Church was the early mission to take on addiction to alcohol. It's not a problem that goes away or is ever over. To have understood that tackling that difficulty had something to do with an understanding of the Almighty is well proven out by twelve-step programs to this day. Higher power is necessary to deal with these strong, strong tethers that would take us where we do not want to go.

Sometimes we go to places we should not go and we do that on a very high horse and with a great deal of righteousness. In the account today of St. Paul's conversion... It's a precious text for me because I was baptized on the 25th of January, 1948, which is the day the Church celebrates the conversion of St. Paul. Here is this extraordinary story of a very religious man who knows the rules and obeys them. He knows the rules so well that on his way to persecute people he gets letters of permission to not only persecute men but - get this - women. I wonder what about the children. Well, that's why you don't baptize infants because they don't know what they're doing. Thank you for that chuckle. It's when you know what you believe and you can say what you believe that you really become dangerous and then we'll come after you. Otherwise if we get you before the age of seven we can make you believe what we want you to believe. Isn't that what the Jesuits said: "*Give me a child before he's seven.*" We all do it. We call it confirmation class. *[laughter]*

Anyway here is Paul on his way to do the righteous work of the Lord, to defend the faith, to uphold scripture, and he's got permission and the authority from the high priest to go do this job. And he's on his way to do his religious work when he is... It's not in scripture but it *is* in art. Most of the memorable depictions of the conversion of St. Paul that I've seen painted by the great artists throughout history have him being knocked off a high horse and either lying of the ground next to an extraordinary rearing steed or some other dramatic position and being blinded by this great light of truth and the word of Jesus asking him why he is being religious, why he is doing this religious thing of persecuting other people who don't agree with him. And the truth is so bright and the brightness of that truth is so life-changing that he can no longer see things the way he used to. He is, for all intents and purposes, blind. And then he gets a visitor from a faithful person. I was grateful for your pronunciation of *Ananias* - however you said it, Michael. When I see the word *Ananias* it always makes me think of the Spanish word for pineapple which is *annanas* and I always think of him as "*Mr. Pineapple.*" *[laughter]* Whoever he was, he believed something about Jesus that Saul could not tolerate and the religious tradition felt was important to eradicate even after Jesus is dead and gone. You'd have thought that killing Jesus would have been good enough. Now they have to not only kill the messenger but attempt to kill the other messengers. That's the radical thing about being a religious person - you're usually equipped with some kind of message to share with somebody else. We call those messengers, missionaries, people who have a mission to share a message about God's love. Well, somewhere along the line Paul found out that maybe he was

barking up the wrong tree. My question is how do you come to that kind of realization? What was it that woke him up?

Scripture takes the easy way out. They say Jesus said it to him. Even after he was dead Jesus said, "*Why are you persecuting me?*" I think somewhere along the line Paul found out that having a relationship - a significant, trusting, beautiful relationship - with another person was way more important than obeying rules that he was told would make God happy. Somewhere along the line Mr. Pineapple, who is supposed to be the enemy of Mr. Saul, shows up against his own better judgment - because he knew Saul was after him - and they come to terms in a relationship in which Saul the know-it-all learned something from Mr. Pineapple. To me it looks something like all of your religious rules are what we used to call "*a crock.*" [laughter] And where true religion really lies is in having a loving relationship with other human beings, even the ones you're afraid of, even the ones who are different from you, even the ones you disagree with, even the ones who have ideas different from yours, and it doesn't at all look like a presidential campaign. It looks like people who believe in a living, loving God are brought into a relationship with that God in the most significant way, not by obeying all the religious claptrap, but by running the risk of relating to other people - no, to *all* people as if that were an opportunity to have a relationship with God herself.

Paul was not given a whole bunch of things to believe. You have to remember the Nicene Creed comes about 325 years after this story. Paul was given a person, who had every reason in the world to be afraid of him, to come to him and love him. And then he started to see again. Things such as scales - could they have been prejudices, old religious behaviors, the Law without a relationship with other people, the Law without love. Could those scales have been religious blinders that fell from his eyes so that his religion might not be the business of riding a high horse and having all the answers, but a much riskier business of having a relationship with somebody who he intended to do in and in whom he found the message of the word of a living, loving God who gave him life and a purpose for the rest of his life. Does it surprise you, friends, that most of the scripture that we call the New Testament was written by this man who was so terribly wrong in his religious posture?

I remember in the days of Richard Nixon... Do you remember talking about credibility gaps? Well, there was a great precedent for a credibility gap with St. Paul, wasn't there. How is anybody supposed to believe what he had to say after they all had seen him high and lifted up on a white horse, a *high* white horse of religious rectitude, self-righteousness, religious righteousness and ugliness argued on the basis of a love for an almighty God who was nowhere to be seen in the world in terms of the eyes and presence of other people but in terms of the right rules to obey, the right amounts of money to pay, the right animals to slaughter, the right clothing to wear, the right food to eat, the right stuff to do which was all aimed at creating a good relationship between me and God and possibly between me and my own kind, but certainly not between *us* and *them*. Do you see, friends, how tempting a closed religious system can be for us, but where does it place us? On a high horse from which we can easily be knocked down.

I saw it this morning on EWTN. A priest was being interviewed and I thought, "*Man, he's got it right!*" He said, "*We welcome all people into this church.*" And he listed the kinds. You know the kinds that aren't welcome in churches. Do we need to make a laundry list? And I thought, "*Oh, he's got it right.*" And then he went on to say, "*But we love them too much to leave them in their sin.*" And I thought, "*Well, you got it wrong, buddy, because you think you have all the answers and that they don't know anything.*" And I thought to myself, "*They probably know more about life than you do and maybe they're not all right but maybe you're not either.*" And the problem I had was he approached his sense of welcome as one in which he was going to "fix" people who came to him. They were welcome there so far as they could be accepted in order to be fixed rather than to believe that he might be fixed and helped by them in the gospel they brought.

It's this religious arrogance to believe that God has spoken only to us and to our kind and through our scriptures and our churches and our liturgies. Well, we can say that God speaks to us through those and surely she has. Think of how long it's been and how hard it's been for us to use *that* pronoun for God to speak to us. But to believe that the religious effort is to take on others who disagree with us, to do them *in* is to really be blind, deaf and absolutely dumb about religion.

Jesus lived in a relationship with twelve filthy-mouthed fishers and others - crooked tax-collectors, sluts, crazy people, even some bent-out-of-shape religious people who were on a real search, and he ran the risk of living with those folks and having a relationship with them - and this is probably heretical, but you're used to that by now from me - a relationship with them that not only changed them but him. And the relationship that changed them changed their thoughts about him so much that after a couple hundred years they wake up to the idea that this guy not only has God's message and God's word but maybe even *is* God's word, God's message. The danger in that position for me is it short-circuits the possibility of believing that God's message and God's incarnate love and God's enfleshed reality is then located only in Jesus rather than in all those other people that Moe said his wife should share her love with when he was dead.

You see, we've now come through the great cycle of Jesus' birth, ministry, life, death, burial and resurrection, and I think it's now more important than ever to remember what we celebrated in Christmas which wasn't a birthday of a little Jewish boy 2,000 years ago, but the idea that God is, in fact, capable, desirous of and does come to the world in every last living human being in a potential way that is discoverable by people of faith if they are willing, if *we* are willing to run the risk of having a relationship - now get this - with people rather than with rules or with books or with ways of doing things, but with people who also have books and rules and ways of doing things who might teach us something about us, our books, our rules and our ways of doing things, with whom we might have an honest, tolerant, patient, loving exchange in which we are given the opportunity to educate others about ourselves if, in fact, we are willing honestly to be educated about them.

Just yesterday I read in *This Week* magazine, which comes to me as a gift from Larry and Sonna Muntz, about a story of immigration into a little town in Germany of people from Syria or Lebanon or one of those countries and all of the fear and anger and upset because they wanted to dump hundreds and hundreds of people into this town. It talked about the sexton and his mother who was the sexton in a convent which had hundreds of rooms. The sisters had dwindled in numbers. They turned the place over for occupancy by these strangers, foreigners, invaders, immigrants - you know all those people who didn't speak the language. And of course a relationship develops between a truck driver from that other country and the floor sweeper and his mother. One of the most beautiful photographs I've ever seen is that family who would have said "No" having learned first of all all the bad words in that other language and learned to communicate, having run the risk of inviting *them* to their holidays and suppers and how the exchange became possible on the basis, not of any idea, not on any political decision, but on the basis of running the risk of a human relationship with somebody who was different and in need. That's all it took, falling in love perhaps even with those perceived to be the unlovely.

Paul was blind to the loveliness of Mr. Pineapple and Mr. Pineapple was really frightened of Mr. Paul because Mr. Paul couldn't see until he woke up to the possibility of the risk involved in true religion which had nothing to do with his pots and pans or his pig. It seems to me - and I will say this on the basis of personal experience in a place like North Bergen where if you drive sixty miles an hour in a forty mile zone on Route 1 and 9, you get a ticket, you pay \$200, you get two points on your license - in a place like that where immigration is a constant reality, where high populations are always the reality - on the basis of personal experience the wealth, the richness, the beauty, the opportunity, the gift of God's glory can be seen in ways that are unimaginable in my life if I had only spent my time in a place where everybody thought the way I did, looked the way I did, did what I did and expected me to do what they did and just sat there frightened of

everybody else in the world or, even worse yet, having value judgements about those who were different. God has a rich gift for all of us in each other and if you come to believe that others have a gift to share with you, you can really start to believe in the gift that you have to share with others and you do. The real way of valuing yourself is found in how you value others.

You know I do have a problems with some of the stories in the Bible. One of them is the Tower of Babel. I don't think that God gives us different languages and different cultures because God is afraid that we will reach heaven. That's sort of the premise of that story. I think God gives us different languages, different cultures, all those things that make us different from each other so that we can reach heaven by coming to learn about each other so that when we meet and encounter each other we're not bored to tears by saying everything that I do you do, everything I like you like, the way I look you look - but do you see we are given the gift of each other as a medium in which to meet God in all of God's variety, peculiarity, strangeness, difference, wonder, glory. Did you hear the words today? Did you hear the words from Revelation read so beautifully by Byron: *"Worthy is the lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing...To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"* Where are you going to find that in this world but in each other? And we worship God because God is different from us, and it seems to me we can start worshiping God by worshiping the differences that face us every day in each other and seeing there the glory and majesty and divinity and diversity and beauty of God which then allows us to value our own identities as a piece of a large mosaic when all of the pieces are together creates the face of God, the image of God in which we are all created.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.