

A Sermon on Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19
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We will probably leave this world pretty much as we entered it, dependent upon others. “. . . When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go,”¹ Jesus comments in the text from John this morning. Live long enough, I suppose, and the emblems of independence will be stripped away from us one at a time. And then, finally, someone else needs to “assist” us.

There is full circle to that. For such dependence was true when you were born as well. You could do little for yourself, and the most basic aspects of life needed to be provided you by others. And just as in old age, your will – what you wanted – could not be trusted.

And then there is that time in the middle, what the writer Richard Ford calls, “The Permanent Period.”² This is the time that Jesus is talking about when he says “. . . When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished.” It is called adulthood. Being an adult is that time when you could make your own decisions, go wherever you want, do whatever you want, will whatever you want. Do you suppose that is the best time of life?

Could you even conceive of an adulthood that was lived out against one’s will? Could you imagine an adulthood in which you could will something but you couldn’t do it? Could you imagine living a life *against your will*?

That is what happened to Saul. “Breathing threats” is how he was living his adulthood. He knew what he wanted to do and he had a record of persecutions to prove it.

Then comes this conversion. Then Saul is overwhelmed. So overwhelming is it that there is no mention anywhere in the story of Saul’s will. Saul loses his will and seems to receive another. Saul did not make some discoveries and then decide that he would lighten up on the beatings and maybe investigate the Christian church as a, shall we say, a seeker. You know, try it out for awhile, see if the people are warm and nice, the pot lucks friendly, the programs for kids and music adequate.

¹ John 21:18.

² “It is another facet in the shining gem of the Permanent Period of life that we try to *be* what we *are* in the present – good or not so good – this, so that accepting final credit for ourselves won’t be such a shock later.” (Italics in the original.) Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006), p. 31 and *passim*.

So overwhelmed is Saul that he goes blind – exactly the opposite of what you would want if you were going to try something out for awhile. Blinded, Saul finds himself in a life he did not choose. Can you imagine that? The words of Kierkegaard haunt this story,

A Christian is a man [person] of will who has acquired a new will. A Christian is a man [person] of will who no longer wills his own will but with the passion of his crushed will--radically changed--wills another's will... Consequently Christianity... is not at all related to transforming the intellect--but to transforming the will.³

Lurking behind this story about Saul is the suspicion that our independent adulthoods are really illusions. We are never quite as independent, voluntary, or free as we would have others believe of us. We are never quite as adult as we believe ourselves to be. Maybe we are dependent in all the seasons of life: childhood surely, advanced age surely, and even in our supposedly independent adulthood.

A cartoon in this week's *New Yorker* depicts a house on fire. The fire department is racing across the lawn to the house. They meet at the burning house a man with a bucket of water in his hand. He waves off the firefighters, "No, thanks – I'm a libertarian."⁴

We work on our confidence. We insist on our right to choose. We cultivate our independence. We achieve a certain amount of power and wealth. We learn skills. All in the service of our adult independence. All in service of our will.

But in the final analysis, none of these is enough. Not even all put together do they guarantee our independence and our ability to do what we will. Deep down you and I know that they can and will fail. You and I are even in our adulthoods profoundly dependent.

There are churches who, wishing to be more seeker friendly, make overt compromises with the Christian faith. Christian symbols, such as the cross, Christian rites, such as Holy Communion are omitted from congregational life. There is the sense that such Christian faithfulness may offend some. There is the sense that "if we teach *that*, no one will come."⁵

To this Christian pastor I find that wrongheaded decision brings with it a certain ironic satisfaction. There is something perversely satisfying about the symbols and rites of one's faith still being so powerful and dangerous that somehow people are afraid of them.

Brian Willoughby, Brian Bernhard, Dianne Nelson, and I have been working with members of the fifth grade Sunday School class in preparing them for their beginning to commune with the congregation. We have examined the Old Testament story of the Exodus, commenting in detail

³ *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, translated and edited by Howard W. and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), VI:569-70.

⁴ April 19, 2010, 73.

⁵ I am borrowing the argument and some of the language from Dirk G. Lange, "A Communion That Is Holy: A Gospel Economy," *Word and World*, Volume 30, Number 2 (Spring, 2010), 182.

about that last night of Israeli slavery. We rehearsed the origin of the Passover meal as a remembrance of God's mighty hand in bringing his people out of Egypt.

We remembered that Jesus, during that last week of his life, also celebrated the Passover meal to remember God's mighty doing in Egypt. But then, right in the middle of the meal, Jesus took bread, broke it and gave it for all to eat. Do this in remembrance of me. Then, in the same way, the cup, offering it for all, saying, "This cup the new covenant – the new promise – in my blood for the forgiveness of sins."

To the class I want to say that communion isn't the first time God has messed with you. That began, you may recall, in your baptism, when God promised you a relationship of forgiveness and discipleship without conditions, terms, or qualification. And now you are about to receive those promises regularly in communion.

Now the only part that those churches who have dispensed with communion have got right is that communion is a dangerous thing. Indeed it is. In communion God continues to make powerful, life-changing promises to you. In communion God has God's way with you.⁶ You just keep faithful in your communion experiences, and God may just overrule your will. You might even end up like Paul, living out a life that is against your will. Perhaps Frances Havergal (1836–1879) had it right when she penned the fifth verse of the hymn *Take My Life and Let it Be*:

*Take my will and make it Thine,
it shall be no longer mine;
Take my heart, it is Thine own,
It shall be Thy royal throne.*

You may have some plans for yourself for when you are all grown up and you can do whatever you want. You may have some important items that you want to buy, riches to accumulate, fame to chase after. So how did all those plans work out for you, Saul? Living a life not of your own choosing, can you imagine that?

Last week at a text study around a table in a church parlor four pastors reflected on this story about Saul. Several Greek words were explored, and an interpretation of the story was carefully teased out of the text. Contemplating Saul and his experience, it slowly dawned on *all* of them that they were a very unlikely bunch to end up as pastors. No one set out to be a pastor. One said, "Nobody in my home town would ever have thought I'd be a pastor." Another smiled and then related that his senior seminary class voted him as "the graduate least likely to ever be ordained." Another had to explain to an old college roommate what had happened to his "breathing threats" period of his college years. For obvious reasons I will not tell you their identities. And you can place your own side bets on which one your pastor was.

⁶ "The Lord's Supper is not some diffuse celebration of life but is defined in a precise way in its essence by means of the connection the Word of Christ that has effective power and the faith." Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. by Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, Erdmanns, 2007), p. 272.

Now, admittedly, becoming a pastor is a pretty sorry outcome when God has God's way with you. Nor can I guarantee that the outcome in our life will be as dramatic as Saul, but I can commend to you the news that the risen Christ confronts you here present in this meal of grace. Here God has promised to work on you. Just keep communing and God will keep working on you.

You will come to see the world differently. Christ's presence in this meal will bring you to see your neighbor differently. Just keep on communing and God may mess with how you do business in the world, how you invest, how you give, how you view your "stuff." Be faithful in communing and you may find yourself in projects you'd never choose on your own. Nothing around and about you will remain untouched by this Easter presence. As Dirk Lange recently wrote, "[Communion] draws us into the spiritual, but the spiritual is not some other realm. It is the daily realm of relationships to others and to things."⁷ This communion with the living Christ is dangerous. It will change your life.

Conversions can happen in many ways. For some, like Saul, it was a brilliant and immediate flash. For some, it can be as gentle and steady as the dawning day. For some it sinks in slowly, as it did for Peter, apparently. For many it comes after years of meeting their risen Lord here in this supper. It is a dangerous meal, as hazardous as the road to Damascus to Saul. Recall Kierkegaard's words,

A Christian is a man [person] of will who has acquired a new will. A Christian is a man [person] of will who no longer wills his own will but with the passion of his crushed will--radically changed--wills another's will.⁸

Perhaps adulthood as it has been marketed to us is a hoax. Perhaps we deceive ourselves with our pretended independence and unfettered will. Maybe we are – all of us, even as adults – dependent on the gifts of God.

May this risen Lord Jesus Christ, who confronts us in this meal of his body and blood, do his work in and through us. And in our lives, may thy will be done. Amen.

⁷ Lange, 187.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Ibid.*