

***A sermon preached by the Rev. Hugh E. Brown, III, D. Min, MSW, LSW, Rector,
All Saints Parish, Princeton, NJ, in All Saints Episcopal Church, Princeton, NJ
on May 1, the Third Sunday After Easter, Year C, Acts 9:1-6***

“But get up and enter the city..”

Inner Essence

In 1906 the Spanish visual artist, Pablo Picasso began a portrait of the novelist, and American Parisian ex-pat, Gertrude Stein.

She sat for him more than ninety times.

Eventually, in great desperation, he wiped away the face completely on the painting.

He left Paris, and upon his return, rushed to resume the portrait.

When at last he revealed the portrait to his friends, they complained that it looked not at all like Gertrude Stein.

Picasso, with great insight, had portrayed Stein, not by her superficial facial characteristics, but by “*her inner essence.*”

More than that, he portrayed Stein.....not as she had been.....or even as she was in the present.....but as she could be.

Picasso once said about this painting, “*Everybody thinks she is not at all like her portrait, but never-mind; in the end, she will manage to look just like it.*”

I think this is the way God treated a man named Saul.

Saul.

I don't know how many are familiar with this name.

Long before St. Paul practically created the religious movement to be known as Christianity, St. Paul was Saul-- a devoted persecutor of the Jesus movement.

The scholarship behind this Saul or Tarsus and his life as a persecutor of the Jesus movement in first century Judaism is fascinating.

Who was this guy? This Saul?

Was he a Pharisee?

What were these Letters from the High Priest?

Why was he engaged in a murderous persecution of this Jesus movement?

What was so threatening about it?

Only an adult forum series can explore Saul's background---his persecution of the early church.

But we do know this.

We know it is because we have his very words as testimony.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 15, speaking of the resurrection and the appearances of Jesus to his earliest followers after his death, this Saul—now Paul—says, *“I am not even fit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God; but by the grace of God, I am what I am; and this grace has not been in vain.”*

In his Letter to the Galatians, Saul, now writing as Paul, says, *“You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God, and was trying to destroy it.”*

He also says this: *“But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.”*

Note these phrases:

“This grace has not been in vain.”

“God, called me through his grace.”

What seemed to be important to Paul—is NOT that he was so wrong.

It was NOT that Paul had sinned so deeply.

It was NOT that Paul was performing a misguided inquisition.

What was important to Paul was not the past....but the future.

What was of critical importance—was God’s grace.

What was this grace of God? For Paul—when he was Saul?

It was nothing less than this: The power of Jesus Christ to change a human being.

It was even more than mere change.

It was about the power of Jesus Christ to empower, to provide, to forge and purge in light--a new purpose and mission.

Sisters and brothers.....to use the language of biblical scholarship....the story from Acts heard this morning...the story of Saul—and sound—and light.....is a **Call Narrative.**

Says the risen Christ to Saul: *“Get Up, and enter the city; and you will be told what you are to do.”*

What a sea change—not only of life—but of Mission!

Like Picasso with Stein....God saw Saul....not as he was.....**but as he could be.**

As the “inner essence” of a human being..... to be named.....Paul.

Perhaps the Road to Damascus experience of a man named Saul—is not a one shot deal and experience.

Perhaps the Road to Damascus is fundamentally about moments of our “inner essence!”

Moments, when—in God’s grace—God reveals this Inner Essence.

My friends—how the world would be different.....and how the church might be better.....if we could treat one another with the way God treated Saul.

How God almighty claimed in Saul—not who Saul was—but For Whom he was to Become.

For Whom he was to Become!

Nothing less than....Christ’s instrument for Mission—for a Changed World—for a New Eve—and a New Adam---and a New Creation!

This morning, we will honor four young adults who offered their gifts and talents to All Saints Church.

They did so by sharing truly devoted ministry through their internships at Princeton Seminary.

Jack, Anna, Wesley, and Elliot offered more than this.

They offered what I hope the ministry of teaching in the Church is all about.

For in my own experience, teaching is not about conveying information.

It is not even, fundamentally about the right ideas and the right doctrines.

In my own mind—those are “Saul” like approaches to education.

Teaching and Education can be about enforcement, about correction, yes, about persecution by authority.

Teaching, when done in Saul like fashion—can be even about destroying souls—not building them up.

Teaching can be about inquisition—rather than illumination.

That is not the way Jesus taught; and not the way Paul would teach—after God’s grace made him St. Paul.

So what is the best of education? Of Teaching?

It is not about encouraging, empowering, and transforming---our Inner Essence?

Is it not about providing safe, spiritual, transforming space for change?

It is not about providing dialogue, not debate?

About mutual discovery? Not win-lose arguments?

For I believe that the Christian way of teaching—as we see in Jesus, in the bible—is the way of the incarnation—the way of the deepest humanity which is divinity, the way of love.

Many of us are Episcopalians today—yes because of the beauty of our liturgy and the grandeur of our music.

But many.....and I count myself among them.....are Episcopalians because the Episcopal Church gave us room.... to breathe....empowering space to think....safe space to feel.....affirmed humanity as the best of the holy, and welcomed our inner essence.

As one of my Canterbury friends in college once said: *“The Episcopal chaplaincy is the only place I have feel free to be what God called me to be.*

Where I did not have to hide; where I did not have to walk on egg shells with my values; where I was embraced as a child of God.”

I remember a poster in the Parish House at Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Virginia—where our Canterbury Campus Ministry met; the poster featured a man with tape over his mouth.

The caption: *Jesus Came to take away your sins—Not Your Mind!*

That is the best of teaching, my friends.

In unique ways, all of our PTS Interns, Jack, Anna, Wesley, and Elliot....have brought out the best in us.....have brought out our “inner essence.”

Their teaching has been soul stuff.

We have come away from their evens and presence as larger, grander souls.

Paul not only heard the voice of Jesus.

He saw light.

“For suddenly a light from heaven flashed all around him.”

In this spirit, I want you to view the photo enclosed in your bulletin.

No—it is not from my boyhood years—although it could have been—for I was a wonder years boomer kid.

It is a photo of one of my spiritual mentors and directors—Glenn Mitchell—the Director of the Oasis Center for Spiritual Development.

Glenn helped teach me the art of Spiritual Direction.

In the photo, Glenn and his brother, the preacher's kids of a pastor, have been a family outdoor shrine.

Here is what Glen writes about it.

We built the chapel, my older brother Wayne and I.

We built it in the woods behind the cabin where we were staying one summer vacation in West Virginia.

We made the altar rail and lashed two poles to it that supported the cross.

My father took the picture.

We made our pastor father proud by creating a space for our family to worship.

In the photo we are looking at the altar

I was immediately drawn to the light under the cross.

Everyone laughs about the way we played church. But no one mentions the light.

I see the Light now. The Light makes sense to me...The Light carries something essential from my childhood.

It comes to me these many years later.....as a kind of confirmation.

There was something there that blazed.....and I was responding to it. I

Isn't that what we all do? See what is lit before us and seek to respond?

We step towards the light and our stepping changes us..... it shapes us.

Sometimes, what is lit can be so subtle, so ordinary....we don't even notice it.

Our formal narratives about what is going on.....like my family's about the chapel.....can fill in the minutia of details without noticing the light.

But the light in us always catches the light as it dances in the world around us.

It is the forming of what is most essential.

It is the shaping of presence.

This is the stepping aside.....that starts something small as we encounter what is lit before us.....what is stirring within us.

The light that calls us again and again eventually becomes the light we are.

We don't necessarily understand it or even clearly see it, but what gets lit in us becomes our offering. In us the invisible becomes visible.

Find the light.

Sit before it.

Sit in it.

Loosen the I.

Be the Am.

Become the light. Love to you all—Glenn....

This what our Princeton Seminary Interns have brought us—Light.

This is what the best of Christian teaching is—Light.

The Light which burned and transformed Saul---into the greater human named Paul.

So—sit before the Light. Sit in the Light.

Become the Light. Share the Light.

Then a Miracle will happen. Another Saul will change.

And the “Inner Essence” of a brother or sister human—will shine—With Light!

