

Sermon for Sunday, July 10, 2022
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Traveling with the Spirit - “Changing Directions”
Pastor Karla Wildberger
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa

Psalm 123, Galatians 1:11-24, Acts 9:1-22

Grace and peace to you travelers from God our Creator and our Lord and traveling companion, Jesus Christ, Amen.

May I see a show of hands – Who here is a cradle Lutheran? (Baptized, all life?) Who was baptized in another denomination? Any here baptized as an older youth or adult? We just heard of Saul’s conversion. Of course, his was quite the dramatic one. It always reminds of the story of Martin Luther diving into the ditch during a thunderstorm!!! Of course, his conversion was not one of changing faiths, but of one changing vocations, but still very dramatic.

I was baptized as a six-month-old, but then was rarely ever taken to church after that, until high school. My best friends were Mormon. I was a bit of a lost soul (both parents were alcoholics and divorced) and their seemingly “perfect” families drew me into their church. So, I started going to church with them (even stopped drinking caffeinated drinks) and started to learn of faith. Then I met a boy who was worried about me, my faith and my soul. So he asked me to go to a weekend retreat put on by the Catholic church, led by college age youth. The theme for that weekend was Psalm 51:10-12 – *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”* That weekend was my “aha” moment, my “come-to-Jesus moment”. It was during that time I first learned of God’s grace. I first learned that Jesus died FOR Me!!! Here I was, just overwhelmed that my sins could be forgiven, that I could be loved that much!!! I never knew such peace, such calm, such love. Not only that, but that I was NOT alone – the Holy Spirit was with me!!! Wow!! Mind blown!! Life changed!!! (And I soon joined a Lutheran church.)

My “conversion” was not dramatic like Saul to Paul. I did not lose my eyesight for three days, but what I SAW was a different way to think, believe and ultimately live my life. The Holy Spirit works in wild and mysterious ways. And we never know when and where She will intercede “with sighs too deep for words”; with nudges; with smacks across the head. And for the Galatians in our “Travel Tip” reading, Paul is nudging the Galatians here – Paul shares his faith story to encourage them. He reminds them that the gospel was proclaimed, taught and received through Jesus Christ. This was how his conversion happened – through Jesus. One commentator wrote that if Paul would have Tweeted about his faith, he would have said this: “God called me through His grace.” When I worked in admissions at the seminary and we would visit places like Luther College, we would encourage folks to sum up their faith statement in a “Tweet version”. Mine was: “A boy led me to Jesus, boy dumped me, Jesus kept me.” (Side note: That boy also went on to be a Lutheran pastor).

But truthfully, that is what God’s grace does, changes everything. I read this quote in the weirdest of places, my Tour de France guide: *“I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us”*. (Anne Lamott) Grace ... it does not leave us where it found us. That is most certainly true for the Apostle Paul, for Martin Luther, for me, and for you.

The other part of this amazing faith story is how the Holy Spirit calls people to walk with us. The Lord said to Ananias to go to Saul. And I absolutely love his very human reaction, “Um, God, um, this guy has done a lot of evil to your people ... really? You want me to go to him?” And the answer was a profound, “Yes!”

This just takes my breath away. We, as humans, judge people, find them not worthy, and God turns all that around and says, “Go be with them.” As I said last week, we are NOT on this journey with Jesus on our own. The Holy Spirit is ALWAYS with us and ALWAYS placing people in our lives at the right time, so that we don’t have to go through this thing called life on our own. Take a moment to think of all the people who have walked with you. *“I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us”*

I worked with nuns when I did my CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education). I was always on call with Sister Immaculata (Sr. Mac) and she was always calm, centered, at peace. I asked her how she did it and she lifted up both of her hands and then placed them on her right shoulder and said, “It is because I take Jesus with me wherever I go.” She was NEVER alone.

You may have noticed: The world wants to divide us, separate us, make us feel alone; and I am going to come out and call that what it is – evil, the devil’s work. When we feel alone, those dark thoughts can overtake us and then cause us to do nasty, horrible things (example: all the shootings that are happening). We need to pray without ceasing for those who feel alone, who become trapped in the dark thoughts, so that they might know God’s grace, love and mercy. However, God’s grace is the exact opposite of the world. God’s grace can move us from a place of darkness to a place of transformation, take us in a totally different direction, take us “from Saul to Paul”.

Let us give thanks to God for the Holy Spirit interceding, for grace, for the people in our lives that have walked with us on our journey with Jesus, and for the people God has given us to walk alongside. And let us pray without ceasing for those who are hurting and do not yet know about Jesus. Jesus and God’s grace do not leave us where He finds us.

We are not alone on this journey. God is with us. Amen.