

John 21:1-19

I think the conversion of Saul to Paul is one of the most amazing stories. It talks about a true character reversal, using the strengths of Saul's character to become one of the greatest proclaimers of Jesus' salvation ever. And we hear it today with the reinforcement of the call of the disciple Peter.

Saul was born a Jew. He wasn't satisfied being unnoticed, he wanted to prove how important he was to the Jews by being one of the most successful persecutioners of those of the Way, those whom we today would call Christ followers. He wanted so badly to succeed that he asked for special permission to travel to Damascus to capture as many of the followers of the Way as he could find.

But God had different plans. As he was riding on the road to Damascus a bright light flashed in front of him, and he fell to the ground. It must have been some bright light to knock him down and out. While he was passed out, or in a daze, he stood in front of Jesus who asked him why he was persecuting his followers. Jesus then instructed Saul to go to the city where he would be instructed what to do. In this amazing conversion Jesus changed Saul's name to Paul. Paul took all the zeal he had used to persecute Christians and put that to use toward converting people to be Christ followers.

When we hear of Paul's conversion, we often wonder why we don't have an exciting conversion story like this to tell. Most of us have been born into our faith, slowly learning to get to know Jesus and growing in our relationship with God. Yet if we delve into Paul's story we will find that he didn't go running out to preach immediately after his conversion. He went into the desert for a time and became closer to Jesus before taking on his missionary status.

But before Paul there were others who followed Jesus. A tax collector and some fishermen were those who heard him say, "Follow me" and away then went, dropping everything, leaving family and home, to follow Jesus on the road. Peter was a fisherman who left his father's business to do just that. For three years Peter went everywhere Jesus went, learning along the way, hearing what Jesus said to the crowds and to the disciples.

Until that one fateful night when Jesus washed the disciples' feet. Peter said he would never disown or betray Jesus to which Jesus replied, "tonight you will deny me three times before the cock crows." Peter couldn't believe what Jesus was saying until, standing by a charcoal fire, he denied being one of his followers, or even knowing Jesus.

Can you imagine the guilt this must have caused Peter? Looking up after the cock crowed as Jesus was being walked past him, looking into Jesus' eyes. Knowing that despite his good intentions he had denied his Master. After Jesus' death Peter decided he was going back to what he knew before he met Jesus and some of the other disciples went with him.

All night long the fishermen were back out on the water, the same place they had been when Jesus originally called them to drop their nets and follow him. Yet, unlike in the past, their night was unsuccessful. All night long they were out on the water and in the morning, they had no fish to show for their efforts. Then they saw a man standing on the shore. He called out to them "Put your net out over the other side of the boat." Why on earth did they pay any attention to this man? They didn't know who he was yet, there was no reason for them to pay any attention to him. But for some reason known only to them they did as he said.

When they pulled in their net there were so many fish the boat was about to sink. That is when Peter realized who the man on the shore was; it was Jesus. Peter put on some clothes and jumped into the water, swimming to the shore because he couldn't wait for the boat full of fish to reach the shore. When he got there, he found that Jesus had a charcoal fire going and was cooking fish for their breakfast. When the rest of the disciples got to the shore, he told them to get some more fish from the 153 they had caught. Jesus gave them some responsibility, even though he was serving them, he expected them to contribute.

Many people are concerned that the exact number of fish was recorded. Several theories have been put out there, but the one that makes the most sense to me is that they were taxed on the fish and had to count each one of them for the taxes. However, knowing that 153 fish were caught it gives us a visual on how many fish there were. For vacation Bible school one year when this was one of the lessons, we took 153 brown paper lunch bags and filled them with a bit of crumpled newspaper and tied the end with a string, so they resembled fish. Believe me, those lunch bags took up a lot of space. Peter recognized the abundance of what had been given to him through Jesus' word.

They ate breakfast together while Peter most likely was thinking about the last time he was standing by a charcoal fire and Jesus was near. How three times Peter had said, "I don't know him." Wondering how he could deny a man who had so much love for people, a man who had washed their feet, and now had cooked them breakfast. After the meal Jesus said to Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" And Peter said, "Yes Lord, I love you." Jesus gave him the task of feeding his sheep. The shepherd was turning over his responsibilities to his disciple.

I can't help but think about the movie Fiddler on the Roof when I think about Jesus asking Peter, "Do you love me?" Tevye has given a poor village boy permission to marry his daughter because they love one another. Something totally different from when Tevye and Golde were married. The conversation goes, "TEVYE: "He's a good man, Golde. I like him. And what's more important, Hodel likes him. Hodel loves him. So what can we do? It's a new world... A new world. Love. Golde.. Do you love me?"

GOLDE: Do I what? TEVYE: Do you love me? GOLDE: Do I love you? With our daughters getting married And this trouble in the town You're upset, you're worn out Go inside, go lie down! Maybe it's indigestion" TEVYE: "Golde I'm asking you a question...Do you love me?"

GOLDE: You're a fool TEVYE: "I know... But do you love me?" GOLDE: Do I love you? For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes Cooked your meals, cleaned your house Given you children, milked the cow After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?

TEVYE: Golde, The first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was scared

GOLDE: I was shy TEVYE: I was nervous GOLDE So was I TEVYE: But my father and my mother Said we'd learn to love each other And now I'm asking, Golde Do you love me?

GOLDE: I'm your wife TEVYE: 'I know...But do you love me?

GOLDE: Do I love him? For twenty-five years I've lived with him Fought with him, starved with him Twenty-five years my bed is his If that's not love, what is?

TEVYE: Then you love me? GOLDE: I suppose I do TEVYE: And I suppose I love you too

BOTH: It doesn't change a thing But even so After twenty-five years It's nice to know

You can say that Jesus was giving Peter a chance to redeem himself, asking him 3 times if he loved him to cover the 3 times Peter denied him. But maybe, just maybe, Jesus wanted to hear the words. Do you love me? Jesus I love you.

How about you, have you ever told Jesus you love him? Maybe he's waiting to hear it from you. All glory be to God.