

The Rev. Stuart Seelman
Sermon
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There are only so many moments in life that we can look back on and realize, “There. That was when everything changed.”

Everything can change in a moment, which is just another way of saying, that we are not in control. And that’s the stuff of both religion and tragedy.

Oftentimes there are moments that are generation-defining. Everyone looks down at their phones at once and realizes, oh, oh no.

But sometimes it’s more individual. Maybe it isn’t an event, so much as a quiet realization lodged in a moment, or a memory of a moment that represents a much larger change over a longer period of time.

And some moments aren’t even remembered, but they must have happened at some point. You can’t mark every milestone and transition. In fact, it can get to be a tiresome way to live.

I was watching Sports Center recently keeping up with buzzing news around quarterback Tom Brady. To make sense of his lackluster late career return to football, they were reporting all sorts of stats and milestones. How he lost his third game in a row for the first time since 2002, in light of how he’s coming up on his 100,000th passing yard, and it seemed like with all this hubbub about milestones and stones, something of the human story there was lost.

We want to believe that everything can change in a moment, but, definitionally, it’s not the kind of thing we’re accustomed to.

More likely than not, living for these moments or making too much of them can suck the air out of the room. Milestones can be an unhelpful form of comparison to other people.

In the Book of Acts, we read a staggering number of firsts and milestones. Most of them have to do with the gospel going beyond Judaism and Judea, to new lands and people. We’ve already had a few: A multilingual, multiethnic Pentecost. Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch. Peter baptizing Cornelius and his household.

And now we have another one of these pivotal moments. But it’s of a Jewish person in Judea, the apostle Paul. He’ll be the central focus for the rest of the book. Most of the rest of the rest of the New Testament will be written by him in deeply spiritual letters to distant churches.

For whatever reason, we don’t get into the Bible without getting through Paul. And more often than not, it can be hard to find a proper place for him.

To this day, when people who have been hurt by the church sift through the Bible to reconstruct some sense of their faith, Paul is often the first they take issue with.

The Civil Rights Preacher Howard Thurman tells a story about his boyhood when he cared for his grandmother. She was born enslaved and lived on a Florida plantation before the Civil War. She could neither read or write, and so Thurman would read to her.

He writes, "I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never...My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.

When I was older and was half through college...with a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves...Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: "Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters ..., as unto Christ. Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."

But then, slaveowner Thomas Jefferson famously reworked the Bible to, excluded the Old Testament, any miracle or supernatural event from the Gospels, and also all of Paul's letters, in order to just get the moral teachings from Jesus without any other the supernatural stuff.

It can be hard to know what to make of Paul, where to place him. He can seem to suck all the air out of the room with his dense letters on the far off and supernatural. With this drastic tale of conversion.

And it speaks to deeper questions, deeper insecurities of ours: is everything supposed to change when I have faith? What if I don't remember one moment when everything changed? Shouldn't we just be concerned with what's in front of us? We're tired of moments where everything change, they only seem to end badly.

So, the Bible paints a larger picture of who Paul is and where he came from. So to find a place for Paul, to find a place for ourselves, we need to see how he found a place. A moment when everything changed.

We first meet him at the stoning of Stephen which Nancy preached on last week. Before the witnesses rush Stephen out of the city and stone him, it says they lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, and it says he was in full agreement with Stephen's murder.

This event leaves the Jewish apostles abandoned in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious life, and their friends are spread across the map, just as they had scattered at the arrest of their friend Jesus. Earlier Matthias was chosen to take the place of Judas among the apostles. But now Saul is retreading the role of Judas at Jesus's arrest, handing them over for persecution.

From the get-go, Saul's story is intertwined with theirs. He is so close to their goodness already, but in a twisted way.

As good Jewish people, Saul and those apostles would both understand that Jerusalem was the center, the place of God's presence and eventual judgement. And the scattering of that church, to the apostles, was a great tragedy, an attack on their faithful life in community. Just as the scattering of populations within the Roman Empire was a great tragedy for his people. When Rome was seen as the international center of the world, they can both agree that Jerusalem is the real central place of the cosmos.

This is ironic, too, when we later learn that Saul is from far away in Tarsus. He's looking to this place and people with insecurity, with a fanatical, empire-driven vision.

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So with a sort of parody of faithfulness in today's passage, Saul goes to return the scattered disciples to Jerusalem...but violently as prisoners. Obedience to Jesus makes one a disciple. But obedience to empire, static commitment to a certain idea of peoplehood and land, just makes you a lackey.

So Jesus meets him when he's on the road *away* from Jerusalem in a light from heaven.

And Saul shows just how close to goodness he resides, despite just how evil his actions can be, when he asks of this light, as if in a prayer, "who are you, Lord?"

I am Jesus, who you are persecuting.

This is the age of the Spirit, and individual identities are falling apart even in the face of religious persecution and empire. Subjectivities are twisted up and intermingled and wrapped up into God's great plan. And Jesus says just where his is placed, in the people who are persecuted.

And now Saul's center, his name and subjectivity, is undone, too, in a moment. The Spirit claims a place in him. His identity will become intermingled with Jesus's and with the other people who bear that name.

I am Jesus, who you are persecuting.

Because when Jesus's true name and identity is shared with us, we are always identified with him and with other people in light of the world's evil and an even more powerful goodness.

And then, he tells us what to do, which is often to wait.

So Saul follows his instructions to go to Damascus and wait. For days in that bed he fasts and prays. He entered what would be understood as a sacred, a sacral, state. Ananias comes to yank him back to the material world, to give him his sight, and two things happen. He gets up and is baptized into Jesus's death. And then he breaks bread with Ananias, reminiscent of communion in the community of life. Now, Saul is to live sacramentally, which is to say, with his own life as a visible symbol of invisible grace.

In a moment everything changed. In Damascus, he turns to his new calling with the same zeal and fanatical devotion as when he was persecuting. If he was zealous for the God when he thought he knew, now he's even more zealous for the God who he has experienced personally.

But no one else witnessed or experienced this moment. Even those who were there just heard the voice but saw no one. And so when he proclaims Jesus in the synagogues, how can anyone understand what he's saying? They ask, "is this not the man who made havoc among those who invoked the name of Jesus?"

The confusion of these people doesn't make them any less dangerous. Danger will follow Saul. So, facing threats of murder, he is lowered out of the city in a basket by his disciples.

He already has his own disciples! Because Saul's identity is empowered by, intermingled with the Spirit, he runs the risk of making the center wherever he is at. Of making himself the center because he's identified with the persecuted so much that they can only remain permanently persecuted. And Jesus won't let him. Saul is not the new center, so he can't remain in one place.

But what are you do when everything changes? Where is your home? Who are your people? What do you do? Saul turns to the center he once yearned for: Jerusalem.

At first, even the disciples are afraid of him, so he must go to the apostles who knew Jesus for themselves, not just a name or a novel identity but a living person they knew and experienced. We don't have much details of their acceptance of Saul.

But we do know that among the apostles in Jerusalem, and empowered by the Spirit, he continues to speak boldly, to get into arguments with Hellenist plotting to kill him. Among a persecuted people, his bold fanatic preaching only means danger.

Because the truth is, Saul grew in the Spirit, but he is still Saul from Tarsus. Still bringing danger with him with fanatical devotion, still desperately trying to find a place and a people.

In all this, he continues to be called Saul. Many believe that Saul's name is changed to Paul in this conversion. But only later is the name Paul used in Acts, without any fanfare. His name doesn't change in his conversion, it only changes when he enters the larger Greek-speaking world, because Paul is a name that is more common to Greek speakers.

And, truth is, we don't need to become radically different people than we already are to serve God. A groundbreaking moment of change might hold up as a nice story for a moment in time, but we are always who we are. And our identification with Jesus, our intermingled subjectivity with the Spirit doesn't undo that, it only deepens and illuminates and sanctifies it. Because God will use who we are, God needs to use who we are at our core to proclaim who God is, not just by our speech but by our very lives.

Saul's life will now be marked by the suffering of Christ. To Ananias, Christ says, "I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." But it would be dangerous to accept the same for everyone without first hearing the Spirit speak.

The passage doesn't end with Saul. We'll have 19 more chapters for that. For a moment, we focus on the church in Jerusalem. The church *throughout* Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. And without much fanfare or detail, it says it had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

For Saul, everything changed in a moment. But for this church, just to survive peacefully, is just as remarkable. That this community harmed by Saul could forgive him is yet more remarkable. But this doesn't mean that the apostles share will share their peaceful life with him.

God's will is not for the gospel to just mean suffering for his people. The persecuted are never to be persecuted in perpetuity.

Because of this, Saul can't remain there. His zealous preaching would only get this traumatized church into further trouble. The center could not hold for them. So they escort him and send him back to Tarsus.

The Spirit who binds them together will, must, bind them from a distance. Because Saul caused them great harm and forgiveness doesn't mean that he can continue to subject people who have already been hurt to even further hurt. This is often what's missed when we talk about forgiveness in our day.

Saul does not receive the center he was hoping for. And the way we center him can only be understand in light of how he got here.

Thurman continues on his conversation with his grandmother: Since that fateful day on the front porch in Florida I have been working on the problem her words presented...It cannot be denied that too often the weight of the Christian movement has been on the side of the strong and the

powerful and against the weak and oppressed—this, despite the gospel. A part of the responsibility seems to me to rest upon a peculiar twist in the psychology of Paul, whose wide and universal concern certainly included all men, bond and free.”

This universal concern is where Paul’s calling leads him and where it will flourish. Because the violent inner drama of the individual, always takes place on the map with many communities. The moment everything changes always happens on the canvas of a Spirit-filled life.

Saul is a Roman citizen. He thinks dangerously, zealously, in terms of Empire. His searing witness can adapt to any time and place, and so he must bring the gospel to that universal center: Rome.

Because the apostles have geographical difference, and we have temporal distance from Paul, we, like them, can appreciate his witness all the more.

Paul was a person in a particular time and place, who’s thoughts are grounded in that time and place (slavery and gender and empire). And many of those elements are best left there.

But we don’t worship a living Paul, we worship a living Christ witnessed by that Paul in a time and place.

And Paul’s great witness is precisely this: that we can’t ask ourselves where to place Paul, without also asking ourselves where the place of the risen Christ is in our hearts.

And our question and challenge for today is this: where is the risen Christ calling us to be placed? How have we placed to serve God?

How can we speak more zealously when our mouths are too easily closed, speechless with lack of gratitude for the immeasurable grace we have already received?

How can we live peacefully and help others live peacefully when we bring danger? How can we forgive and accept forgiveness without causing further harm?

In a moment everything can change.