



Hear the Word

from Pastor James N. McEachran



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 10, 2018

Growing Forward

Acts 9:1-19a

N.T. Wright is a world class Biblical scholar. One time Bishop of Durham; now teaching at the School of Divinity at the University of Saint Andrew's in Scotland.

His writings cover every area of New Testament scholarship. Some of them are easily read, others are just "dense." His most recent is a biography of Paul, a man who learned the true meaning of **GROWING FORWARD** in the Lord.

Saul, you will recall, was not a fan of Way, the people of Christ. He was a Pharisee, one of "the righteous" who, as Wright writes, has words that "still have the capacity to jump off the page and confront us."

The First Lesson sets the foundation for Saul's mission---"breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest as asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, to that if he found any who belonged to the Way men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

Saul was not acting with a mind like a blank slate. He was a man of covenant, deeply religious, an observant Jew who was devoted to Torah. He was a diligent searcher of Scripture who saw the Jesus movement as a heresy, a threat, not from God, but from man. He was a devout believer, zealot follower of the Law, the "hope of Israel." But, his life changed, converted into growing forward.

Along the way, on the road, he had what we still call "a Damascus Road" experience. To use a good Baptist word, "converted," changed out, and accepted by God in Christ forever.

You know the story: classic "turn-around" story with "light from heaven" and "a voice." Imagine it! "Saul, Saul, why persecute me?" Incredibly direct and personal. A dialogue on the road:

✠ "Who are you, LORD?"

✠ "I am Jesus! The one you are persecuting. Get up, go to the city, wait."

✠ No vision, (eyes of his heart not open yet!)

✠ A mentor in the waiting (note the call: Ananias who immediately says "Here I am, Lord." Saul is "praying" and has a vision that a man (Ananias) a bit fearful believe it or not, is known as the one who will heal him.

✠ Ananias goes (with trust, but just a bit reluctant and fearing he may become the victim). The

words are instructive: "Brother, brother! Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

✠ Mission Accomplished: eyes enlightened/sight; baptized, "taking some food," perhaps, Holy Communion, strength regained; **Saul-Paul**, renamed in Jesus to be about the mission to the ends of the earth.

In a sense, this is our story too of our conversions into Christ each day. From the dawn of each new day, signed and kept by the cross, sent into the world of our daily lives, to lift high the Cross and to be about the witness to Jesus in our words, in the ways we love one another, and show that love in our words of gentleness in a culture of hard rhetoric and our actions of solidarity with the hungry, the homeless, the hopeless who see in us the way of Jesus.

Paul went on to be an instrument of dramatic change, mostly through letters which occupy fewer than 80 pages in modern translation. Yet, words, Spirit-learned, which the platform becomes for the Church in every time and place. Truth which moves people like you and like me to grow forward in our pathways of life so that others might know and believe the reconciling love of God in Christ which empowers each of us to change the world, one person at a time.

It is for that purpose that our Charter Members risked in faith to start a congregation in Eastgate. As I have read and lived that story through these past years with you, we are the fruit not of the ministry of a cadre of clergy who led, but a people who said "Here are we, send us" and have mentored the generations to plant in this place a community which is a **Servant Koinonia**, fellowship of those who walk where the Spirit leads each day.

Imagine Paul, writing to a congregation in Ephesus, the words of the Second Lesson. They would all know his story and some may have said "Remember, he was the one who held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen, the deacon, to death"; marvel at what happened to this persecutor of Christians who blossoms with words of promise: take heart, have hope, share the Lord Jesus through "the boundless riches of Christ, our Lord, access to God bold and confident, Christ who dwells in our hearts, rooted and grounded in love, filled with the fullness of God."

Those are Paul's words to Saint Andrew's in these times of distress in our world, in times of transition in our faith community, and in the challenge to GROW FORWARD, DEEPENING OUR TRUST IN GOD, THE LORD JESUS IN WHOSE NAME WE LIVE IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. For we are called to courage! Grounded in the Word, Font, and Table. In the peace that binds us forever!

Today is our Semi-Annual Meeting (My last one in the progress of our years in shared ministry). This meeting was established years ago as "informational" and to launch our community into what were once "the hazy lazy days of summer."

Today is means to be a benchmark of continued faithfulness in Christ. For we keep our Mission Statement before us: GATHER, we do; ENCOURAGE, is who we are as shared faith mentors; EQUIPPED, the Holy Spirit sends us in the life of good old Saul, now Paul; SENT, our each moment walk out in the mission field in the name of Jesus.

I chose the Gospel for a single purpose: TO CALL US NOT EVER TO THINK IN DEFICIT, TO NEVER LOOK BACK FOR MORE THAN A BIT OF REVERIE THAT WE MIGHT SEE THE GOOD, flowing from The Hill Top Inn, the first worship space in 1956.

We are **Stewards of God's Generosity**. A steward is a manager. We are all called to be those who humbly receive what God has given to give away: our love, our joy, our peace, our hope. The generous harvest of the Holy Spirit in midst today and as long as God gives us life together.

There is no crisis in this place; we are a portal of possibility in Christ; forgiven and set free to act after

the model of Jesus who just keeps on giving, forgiving, loving because we are His presence in the world and God expects and empowers us to act that way!

Did you get the Gospel? The image is one of hunger and provision. The words are Eucharistic: **TOOK FIVE LOAVES, LOOKED UP TO HEAVEN, BLESSED AND BROKE THE BREAD, AND GAVE THEM TO THE DISCIPLES TO GIVE TO THE PEOPLE. ALL ATE...FILLED UP...TWELVE BASKETS...FULL...TWELVE...SUFFICIENT TO OVERFLOWING FOR EACH DISCIPLE TO GO AND TO SHARE.**

I am not sure who counted, but those who had eaten numbered five thousand (Men/WOMEN/CHILDREN). It is just that we are the disciples who are just called to go and to know that we are growing forward in courage, confident, that each day we are sufficient for the mission, the journey, for Christ Jesus is with us forever.

In his book, N.T. Wright notes that "human beings are deep wells of mystery." True! And like any good mystery, God knows the rest of the story!

"NOW TO HIM WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAT ALL WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE, TO HIM BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH AND IN CHRIST JESUS TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER, AMEN!"