

“Why Ask?”

Acts 9:1-6; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 1, 2022, dedicated to the memory of Ed Koetz, to my brother Paul on his 67th Birthday, to my Uncle Edison Klinger on his 90th Birthday, my wife Susan E. Sitler on her 65th birthday, to my great-nephew Bennett Roy on his 13th Birthday, to my granddaughter Emryn on her second birthday, to my grandson Axel on his first birthday and to my sister Deb Ahrens on her 69th birthday, to my great-niece Dylan Roy on her confirmation day, to Grace Glaros and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Our Easter Season texts are filled with “turnaround tales.” On Easter, the greatest turnaround tale is Jesus rising from the dead. It doesn’t get any better than that! But all the stories that follow speak of turnarounds, too. The disciples at table with Jesus in Emmaus, Thomas in the Upper Room with Jesus, and now we encounter Saul (read Paul) and Peter’s turnaround tales.

Saul of Tarsus was a religious leader who had a lot of hate in his heart. He especially hated Christians. He felt anyone who was Christian should be put to death. He led the stoning to death of Stephen and here in the 9th chapter of Acts, we meet him on the road to Damascus determined to crush the movement of Jesus people once and for all.

God has another plan. As the self-proclaimed prosecutor and notorious persecutor of Christians heads to Syria, Saul is leveled by a bolt of lightning and the voice of Jesus. Flannery O’Conner writes, *“I reckon the Lord knew the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.”* (*The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald, NY, Vintage Books, 1979, p. 355).

While lying in the dust, he hears the voice of Jesus ask, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”* Saul asks, “Who are you, Lord?” The voice replies, *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”*

From the dust on the Damascus Road, the temporarily blinded Saul rises to eventually become the greatest Evangelist of our faith. His turning from darkness to light is one of the most dramatic stories of change the world has ever known. The Hater of Jesus became the Lover of Christ. Through the power of God at work in him, Saul completely turns around.

In John’s Gospel, the Risen Christ is making breakfast on the beach along the shores of Galilee’s Sea. He invites his disciples to join him. Truthfully, it is not every day that someone – having risen from the dead – can make a fire and catch and cook some fish by the seaside. His friends have seen him in resurrection light twice in John’s Gospel – both appearances in Jerusalem. Now, as John’s Gospel draws near to a close, we meet the risen one, one last time.

Although he is cooking for everyone, Jesus' is singularly focused on Peter during his conversation. The two of them have things to work out. Peter has some reconciling work to do with his savior.

Remember, just a few days before, Peter denied Jesus three times as Jesus was being arrested, beaten, tried and ultimately crucified. Peter told everyone within earshot that he had no idea who Jesus was. Hadn't a clue. Imagine how that must have felt to the one being arrested, beaten, falsely accused, and crucified? So, when Jesus asks Peter, "*Do you love me?*" he is really digging deep with his question!

Three times Peter acknowledges his love for Jesus. Each time, Jesus calls his leading disciple to care for the sheep as a shepherd does. By the time Jesus is done with these questions, Peter is rattled! He should be. Finally, Jesus calls Peter even deeper. He says, "*Peter, when you were a child, you would run and play and go wherever you wanted to go. However, as an adult, you will be called to a place you would rather not go (meaning the place where Peter would be crucified – upside down on the cross!) . . . Come and follow me.*"

Peter turns around on the seaside at Galilee. Faced with the challenge of Jesus to love, Peter comes back to life. He rises to become the leader that Jesus had always believed him to be. He not only proclaims his faith in Jesus but demonstrates obedience and a heart to follow him.

He turns completely around.

Paul and Peter are both "turnaround tales," which are foundational turnaround tales in the early church which continue to shape and inform each of us today. In her book, *Darkness to Light*, Dr. Beverly Roberts Gaventa shows how the New Testament is packed with one

turnaround tale after another. Dr. Gaventa frames these turnaround tales as one of three kinds of changes – alterations, pendulum-like conversions or transformations of faith. Alternations are when we move from one church to another, Pendulum-like conversions are like moving from Christian faith to Hindu faith. Transformations of faith happen when completely turned around – we are changed! I would love to dig deeper into her writing, but now is not the time. Rather, the question for us in light of these transformational turnaround tales of Jesus and Paul and Jesus and Peter is “why bother asking questions?” Simply put, “Why Ask?”

Jesus stops Paul on the road to Damascus and asks, “*Why do you persecute me?*” Jesus asks Peter three times as the seaside breakfast, “*Do you love me?*” Why did he bother to ask questions? Why ask questions at all when you think you know the answer and want to make a declaration instead.

When I was young, my father, who was a journalist and an editor asked a lot of people a lot of questions. He had questions for me and everyone else. One day he said to me, “*Tim, I have learned over my lifetime it is much better to ask questions than to make statements about which you don't have enough information.*” I don't know about you, but I have been on the giving end and the receiving end of judging statements to and from folks where I and they would have been much better served and helped by questions – not statements. Giving and receiving judgment can be a dangerous thing. Asking questions and listening carefully can really serve in healing.

We have a lot to learn from Jesus on this. Facing one who persecuted him and his followers unto death and one who denied and abandoned him unto death, Jesus asked questions about persecution

and love. Let's take our lead for asking questions from Jesus. He was always asking questions – questions about how people were, how he could help them, what they needed from his healing hands and what, in his teaching presence, could he offer them.

These and other Turnaround tales begin with questions. And the people in our lives who ask questions really help us most to turnaround too. While this is true in our personal lives, it is also true in our communal life together and our society.

I have been thinking about this with BREAD this week. In nine days, BREAD will gather at the Celeste Center to have our BREAD Nehemiah Action. We will arrive there through yet another research process. Thousands of questions have been asked to many people for 27 years. Hundreds of questions have been asked this year about Environmental Injustice in our community. Having tackled fair and affordable housing, jobs and job creation for the poor, health care, reconciliation in relationships in education and justice work, reading in the public schools, violence on our streets, BREAD has focused on Environmental Justice this year.

How do you get ahold of Environmental Justice and make a change in the injustice that people face environmentally? Having asked hundreds of questions to leaders in our community – in part – the answer is this: We will push for protections of trees on private land, since 70% of our trees are on private land. Councilmember Liz Brown, of Columbus City Council, has agreed to come to the Action and we believe she will agree to work on drafting the ordinance. Columbus has had 3 of the wettest years on record in the past 5 years, and large, mature trees are essential in combating excess stormwater. Combatting the cutting of trees on private land will

help us with water runoff and more. You have to start somewhere. Asking questions has led us to this conclusion and a creative solution to our problem.

I invite you to be a part of a turnaround tale in Columbus. I invite everyone here and all your friends and family to join together at the Celeste Center at the Ohio State Fairgrounds on May 10th to add all of our voices and physical presence in support of this environmental protection action. We are talking about no more than 120 minutes of your life to join with others for justice action. Can you and will you join with 200+ members and friends of First Church and several thousand other Jews, Christians, and Muslims on Tuesday, May 10th from 6:45pm to 8:30pm? Please do. Thank you.

As we come to God's table of grace and receive the bread of forgiveness and the cup of reconciliation, let each one of ask ourselves, "How do I want to be and who do I want to be as a follower of Jesus Christ?"

Why ask?

Perhaps because it will shape the next question and the next question and the next question that we ask and how we will live in the world and how we will live with all people and all creation whom God has given to our care. Amen.

