

Suddenly Scales
 Rev. Cindy Maddox
 May 8, 2022

Acts 9:1-20

Saul, also known as Paul, was a devout Jew,
 a fundamentalist in his view of scripture,
 devoted to protecting his religious faith and traditions.
 The biggest threat to his religion as he saw it was the Jesus movement,
 and the followers of what was then called “The Way.”
 He first appears in the 7th chapter of the Book of Acts
 an approving witness to the mob stoning of Stephen,
 who is considered to be the first Christian martyr.
 In the next chapter we are told that Saul was “ravaging the church
 by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women,
 and committing them to prison.”
 And here, in chapter eight, he was
 “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord”
 and setting out to arrest them.
 Did you notice the verb choice there?
 He wasn’t just speaking threats and murder.
 He was *breathing* them, as if hatred was in his very lungs.

And then, “*suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.*
He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him,
‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’
He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’”
 It seems strange to include that salutation.
 Not just “Who are you?” but “Who are you, *Lord?*”
 Saul addresses the voice as *Lord*
 because he recognizes a theophany when he sees one.
 Saul’s encounter echoes many others from Saul’s own scriptures:
 Moses, Ezekiel, and Daniel all had similar experiences.
 Saul’s use of the word *Lord* “is not yet a confession of faith in Jesus
 but an honest query of a devout Jew who understands
 the significance of his experience from reading Scripture.”¹

¹ New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary.

And yet he doesn't understand fully,
because this does not sound like the God he worships.
Jesus replies, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."
Not "I am Jesus, whose followers you are persecuting."
Jesus so identified with those in danger that he *was* the persecuted.
Of course, the story tells us that Saul was blinded for three days,
and when he finally was given back his sight,
his eyes were opened metaphorically as well,
and he became arguably the greatest evangelist of all times.

It's difficult to imagine a more complete transformation.

Stories like that just don't happen every day.
But I do know of one that sounds rather similar.

An old friend of mine grew up in Mississippi.

While in grad school she met another grad student
who attended the same church.

They were casual friends, went out a time or two.

She described him as a nice guy—quiet, smart, well-read.
One day he spoke at their church, and he told his story.

"As an ordinary high school student in the 1960s,
Tom Tarrants became deeply unsettled by the social upheaval of the era.

In response, he turned for answers to extremist ideology
and was soon radicalized.

Before long, he became involved in the reign of terror
spread by Mississippi's dreaded White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan,
described by the FBI as the most violent right-wing terrorist organization
in America."²

He quickly moved through the ranks,

until he became known as "the most dangerous man in Mississippi."

In what he considered a "righteous" effort to disrupt the Civil Rights Movement,
which he believed was a Communist plan to mongrelize the white race,
he planted 30 bombs in homes, churches, and synagogues
throughout the southern United States.

Captured in an FBI sting operation with 19 bullets in his body

² <https://www.amazon.com/Consumed-Hate-Redeemed-Love-Reconciliation-ebook/dp/B07KDYXJRJ>

and impaled on an electric fence,
 Tom recovered and was sentenced to 30 years in jail.
 He was determined to get out so that he could continue his work,
 which he considered “God's mission.”

While he was in prison, Tom read widely about philosophy and various religions.
 And then he decided that he needed to read the Bible,
 not as it had been quoted to him, but for himself.

The Jesus he met in the Gospels transformed his life.
 The scales of racism and hatred fell from Tom’s eyes, and he could see.
 He became an advocate for racial justice.
 “God followed me all the way to prison,” he says, “just to set me free.”

The warden allowed him to lead tours of the work camp program,
 giving him an opportunity to tell his story to thousands of people
 who came through the prison.

He was released years early because the very persons he had attacked
 vouched for his transformation.

He became an informant against the KKK,
 got an M.Div. and a doctorate in spirituality,
 and became the co-pastor of a multiracial church.

He finished his career as the president of the C.S. Lewis Institute.
 He tells his story in his book *Consumed by Hate, Redeemed by Love*.³

We need more stories like that, don’t we?
 We need more stories of dramatic, life-changing transformation
 because there is so much in our world that needs transforming.
 Jesus is still being persecuted,
 and still sometimes by people of faith.
 An awful lot of scales need to come off
 so that we can see with clear eyes.

I don’t have great, dramatic stories like that in my life.
 Few of us probably do.
 But I bet we all have small ones.

I was 27 years old.

³ Info from a friend, articles including https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/once-a-klansman-he-now-has-a-prescription-for-tolerance-true-christianity/2019/09/06/9a42de50-d0f6-11e9-8c1c-7c8ee785b855_story.html, and Tom’s book <https://www.amazon.com/Consumed-Hate-Redeemed-Love-Reconciliation-ebook/dp/B07KDYXRJ>

I had recently come through a disastrous marriage,
and was still recovering from the emotional trauma of it all
when my ex-husband declared bankruptcy,
leaving me on the hook with several of his creditors.
I had paid a high price for that marital mistake,
and now I was going to have to pay again.
It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. And I was bitter.

I went on a business trip to New York City,
and while our sales staff was working the convention floor,
the creative staff followed the art director around Manhattan.
She led us through all these expensive stores—
pointing out designers she liked,
encouraging us to “buy a souvenir for yourself” —
when all I could afford was an I-heart-NY magnet.
We moved in and out of the July heat,
walking for what felt like miles in my high heel shoes and business suit
that were required corporate attire at the time.
By the end of the afternoon my head was pounding,
my stomach was churning,
and I just wanted to go home.
Instead we all gathered back together for dinner—
probably 16 of us in a small Italian restaurant.
I ended up on the booth side, crammed in shoulder to shoulder,
with three or four people on either side.
As soon as our food arrived, and the aroma hit my nose, my stomach flipped.
I had to send it away, then make everyone move to let me out of the booth,
and I ended up outside the restaurant trying to get some fresh air—
or as fresh as the air in New York City gets in July.
I was standing there in my rumpled suit,
having just sent back to the kitchen
a meal that probably cost my week's grocery budget,
feeling immensely sorry for myself,
drying my tears with a white linen napkin.
Suddenly a man stopped in front of me.
He ducked his head to try to catch my eye.
“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded.

He didn't look convinced. He held out a bottle. "Need some water?"

I shook my head, hoping he would go away.

He reached into his pocket. "Want a cigarette?"

"No thanks, I'm fine."

He nodded and took a few steps away, then stopped and looked back.

"If you're gonna' stand there for a minute, could you do me a favor?"

He pointed a few doors down to a cardboard box.

"Would you keep an eye on my house for me?"

A man experiencing homelessness offered to share everything he had with a crying stranger in a suit.

Immediately something like scales fell from my eyes.

I was 38 years old, and my church participated in what was basically a traveling homeless shelter for women, offering hospitality to twenty women four weeks per year.

The highlight of the week for our guests was our trip to the Goodwill store.

We gave each woman a store credit for them to buy what they needed.

I got to drive the van on one of those trips,

and partway there I wasn't sure which route to take.

I called back to one of the other volunteers for her opinion.

One of our guests was sitting up front in the passenger seat and said,

"You could have asked me."

"Could have asked you what?"

"You could have asked me for directions.

I've lived in this town for 20 years. I know where Goodwill is."

"I'm sorry," I stammered. "I didn't know."

"You didn't ask," she corrected me.

"You just assumed I didn't know.

You people always assume we don't know squat."

"I'm sorry," I repeated, more earnestly this time.

She didn't respond.

She didn't offer forgiveness.

It wasn't her job to make me feel better about my assumptions.

And something like scales fell from my eyes.

I was 48 years old, and I was a new foster parent.
 As wards of the state, foster children qualify for the WIC program,
 which of course provides formula and nutritious food for children at risk.
 At the time it came in the form of vouchers
 that stated specifically what was covered—
 what kind of formula, what size bottle of juice, etc.
 But the child in our care had allergies
 and didn't do well on regular formula.
 He needed Nutramigen, which cost twice as much as the regular kind.
 The 23-year-old "nutritionist" at the WIC office was probably just following orders
 when she refused to honor the prescription written by his doctor.
 She insisted we try the soy product first.
 I tried to explain what the doctor had told me:
 that the soy product would not only not solve his problem,
 but it would add new ones.
 The young woman looked at me disdainfully
 and said loud enough for everyone there to hear,
 "You can't just walk in here and get Nutramigen!"
 I slunk out of the office—feeling embarrassed, almost tearful,
 because I was just trying to do what was best for the child in my care
 and I was made to feel like a demanding freeloader.
 Then I realized.
 I was a middle-aged, educated white woman
 accustomed to authority and privilege,
 and I couldn't advocate for my child's needs.
 And if I couldn't, how could a young mother with limited life experience
 or limited education or limited English
 possibly advocate for hers?
 And suddenly something like scales fell from my eyes.

I have never experienced a dramatic turnaround like Saul or like Tom Tarrants.
 But I've had so many small ones.
 I know you have, too, and I hope to hear your stories.
 But after so many experiences like this myself,
 I'm now asking: "How many sets of these scales do I have?
 How many layers of blinders do I wear?
 How many times must my eyes be opened?"

It's a good question for us as a society, too.
 It's not like we didn't all know about police brutality against people of color
 for decades, for centuries.
 But Eric Garner was killed by police in July of 2014 and our eyes were opened.
 Three weeks later it was Michael Brown.
 Two months later it was Tamir Rice.
 Then it was Walter Scott and Freddy Gray and Philando Castille
 and Jordan Edwards and Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.
 Have those scales good and fallen by now?

On a different front, it was Columbine, and our eyes were opened.
 Then it was Virginia Tech and Aurora and Sandy Hook
 and Santa Monica and Parkland.
 Have those scales fallen by now?

And then it's laws taking away rights
 and laws taking away freedoms
 and laws rewarding vigilantes
 and laws taking away freedoms because of one group's religion
 and laws threatening decades of progress toward equality.
 Surely those scales have fallen.

At this point you may be asking, "Who you preaching to, Cindy?
 Because we all know this. We don't have any scales."
 First, I would question that, because there is always more to see.
 But sometimes we do feel like we see too much, and there's the problem:
 we face so much, we see so much, that it is easy to get overwhelmed.
 It is easy to lose hope.
 It is easy to look around and think we, as a people, are too far gone,
 and the task is too big.
 We fear we have passed the point of no return.
 But the Apostle Paul and Tom Tarrants both tell us differently.
 And the little stories tell us differently, too.
 They all point to a different possible future
 because in reality there are two faithful responses
 to our scales being removed:

- 1) we work to change the situation, end the oppression, call out the injustice,
- 2) and we serve as the catalyst for the scales to fall from other people's eyes; we help other people to see.

We can't all do both, and certainly not with all the issues we have before us.

But we each can do some, in whatever type of work speaks to you.

That's why we work with ISAIAH.

That's why we support the CAC.

That's why we sponsor CYAN and LGBTQ affirming spaces.

That's why we have the Social Justice Ministries Team,
to pull together the work of all our social justice teams—
Racial Justice, Immigrant Welcoming, Open & Affirming,
Creation Care, Land Acknowledgment.

That's why we are starting this week to say our covenants in worship,
to remind us of our commitments,
to keep the scales from slipping back on.

We don't do it perfectly.

We won't do it perfectly.

Paul didn't either, as some of his writing reveals.

But we have to be willing to do the work imperfectly,
one step at a time, learning as we go.

And maybe once in a while we stop to ask ourselves—
and each other—
what's that over your eyes?