

WGUMC April 24, 2016
Acts 9:1-20

"The Further Journey"

I got my first horse when I lived in Iowa. Then we moved to Montana, and I got my second one. He was a quarter horse gelding taken off the range and broken to saddle by the meanest horse trainer in Billings. I quickly learned that getting up on his back often meant getting tossed off not long after. So, I learned how to safely jump off before I could get bucked off. My sisters didn't call me "Bucky" for nothing.

I know the hard truth from that old Blood, Sweat and Tears song: "What goes up must come down." But in his book, *Falling Upward*, Richard Rohr shares a different truth, this one just as hard: in order to go up, you have to first fall down. It's a truth that comes to light in our story about Paul's conversion in the Acts of the Apostles this morning. Let's take a look.

The story begins: "Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...." It is interesting that the Holy Spirit is known for breathing life, but here Saul

(later to be known as Paul) is breathing death. The verse continues: "went to the high priest...." That phrase reminds me of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. [Mark 14:10] Goes to show you that Jesus keeps getting betrayed, again and again. "...and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus...." Who would have guessed that Paul would soon be writing letters of a very different kind. "...so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." Come hell or high water, Saul was going to set them straight and turn them around. Little did he know that Jesus would turn him around and that the disciples he met in Damascus would bind him to the Way.

"Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light...." Whenever something big is happening in the Bible, whenever God is creating something new, there is always a light. Saul was going along, and God said, "'Let there be light'; and there was light." [Genesis 1:3] And what did Saul

do when he saw the light? He fell to the ground. Now, the paintings of this scene usually depict Saul falling from a horse. I can relate. "...and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" Paul himself tells this story two more times in Acts and in the retelling in Chapter 26, Jesus adds a comment that doesn't appear in the other two versions. In verse 14, Jesus says, "It hurts you to kick against the goads."

There's a phrase we don't hear much anymore, and most of us hardly know what it means. Back in the Bible, a goad was a shepherd's staff or stick used to drive sheep. Today, we have a cattle prod, and Rohr uses the word to indicate the authorities or driving forces in our life. Parents and other authority figures are good examples of goads. So are the rules and traditions we live by and the tribes we belong to, because they are some of the driving forces that shape the container we are born into and that we have to kick against in the first half of our lives. Goads give us the boundaries that we have to

butt up against in order to create our own identity. [Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 33]

That's all to say that who we are is determined both by the rules we live by and the rules we rebel against, as my daughter can tell you. Years ago, I made a page for Kristen's baby book with the title, "Oppositionality is My Personality." That seemed fitting because when she was three, she made two declarations to me: "I have no rules" and "I make the rules." Together, these two statements sum up the dilemma of growing up: we have a strong need for rules and just as strong a need to break them.

The Bible told me that long before Kristen was born. But instead of rules and rebellions, Paul talks about law and freedom. In his letters to the Galatians and to the Romans, he argues that we are determined both by law and by freedom, and the challenge is to live in that creative tension, which isn't easy. [35]

Rohr goes so far as to say that even God is characterized by law and by freedom, in other words, by *conditional* as well as by unconditional love. [33] We don't like to think about the love of God and the word "conditional" in the same sentence. But what are the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount but examples of the conditional love of God? God is always saying things like, *if you obey my commandments, then things will go well with you. But if you don't, then they won't.* [Deuteronomy 30:16-18] Even Jesus talks conditionally: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...." [John 15:10]

Nevertheless, the conditional love of God doesn't trump the unconditional love of God. Quite the contrary, Paul will later write, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." [Romans 5:8] That means that even when we don't keep God's rules or meet God's conditions, God loves us anyway.

God's conditional and unconditional love gives us strong boundaries, because they "give us the necessary security, continuity, and ego structure that we need, before the chaos of real life shows up." [25] Rohr argues, and I would have to agree, that people who grow up in more conservative or traditional homes with strong boundaries are generally far healthier than those who grow up in homes where there are no such boundaries and where the children have no goad to kick against.

Saul was a person who had strong boundaries. Within him lived what Rohr calls a "loyal soldier." Like the older son in the Parable of the Prodigal, Saul was the one who always followed the rules and was all too eager to goad others with them. He thought that he was obeying the commands of God when he was actually following the demands of his inner loyal soldier, his Superego. [47] As long as his Superego was in charge, Saul was stuck in the first half of his life.

In order for Saul to get to the second half of life, to get from the road to Damascus to the Way of Jesus, he had to do what Rohr calls "discharging the loyal soldier." Just as soldiers today often have difficulty leaving the military, Paul had a hard time taking off the uniform that he had been wearing and the strict rules that he had been following. And we do, too. Those of us who try to discharge our own loyal soldier find that we have to question everything we had always assumed to be true, and that can make us feel as if our whole world is collapsing around us. And we wouldn't be far from the truth. This is our first step on the "further journey," one that Rohr warns us we will experience as a setback. It will feel like a loss: a loss of faith and a loss of self. [50]

That's what happens to Saul on the road to Damascus. The guy who has been using the law as a goad learns that the real driving authority in his life, is not the law, but the Lord.

And by continuing to kick against the goad, against God-in-Christ, he is only hurting himself.

That realization comes as a flash of light to him, and when it does, he literally loses himself, bit by bit. First he loses his balance and then he loses his sight. The men traveling with him lose their words; they stand speechless. But they help Saul get to the city where he stays for three days, and loses all desire for food and drink. Just as Jesus spends three days in the tomb, Saul spends three days discharging his loyal soldier and during those three days, he experiences a kind of death. But for Rohr it is only the death of his false self, so that his true self [his soul] can be reborn. [50]

Call it a vision quest, call it some kind of New Age cleansing ritual or simply call it what it was: a conversion experience. Most of us don't have a road-to-Damascus type conversion. But almost of all of us discover that we have to in some sense fall down before we can fall up. I can't tell you

what kind of conversion you should have, but this I can tell you: you won't come out of it the same person that you were when you went into it. It is quite an experience, whether it happens all at once or over the course of many years. Sooner or later, you have to be lost in order to be found. You have to be blinded so that you can begin to see.

In our story today, God sends a reluctant Ananias to be the midwife to Saul's spiritual rebirth. Ironically, he finds Saul in the house of someone named Judas. For three days, Saul has deprived his physical senses and now Ananias is here to lay hands on him so that the Holy Spirit can awaken what Wesley calls his "spiritual senses."

"And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength." I was intrigued by the words "something like scales fell from his eyes" and wondered what that could be. I figure they were

something like tears, because I know that every time I lose some of my false self and find more of my true self, I usually end up in tears.

There were some tears this week. One of our older shelter ladies has more than one life-threatening condition. She was in and out of the hospital again last week. As the rotating shelter was coming to a close at St. Martin of Tours, many of us were really worried about her. Where would she go? Who would watch out for her? What if she needed help and no one was around her? Susan, Becky and I traded phone calls and emails to see if there was anything we could do. We began to put together an emergency plan and just as it looked as if it might work, I got a call from Becky telling me that our sister was about to get on a bus with another homeless woman, headed for Santa Monica, not knowing where she was going or what she was going to do when she got there.

We were devastated. We couldn't imagine this ending well. We had been so ready to do what we had to do to make sure she was safe, and she left without saying good-bye. After hanging up, I sat on the porch and stared off into space. Barely two minutes passed when I heard my cell phone ping. It was Lisa, forwarding the message from Heidi that her daughter, Ellie, who had disappeared a year and a half ago, had made contact with her mom. After eighteen months on the streets in Southern California, Ellie was on her way home. Praise be to God!

Ellie has been on a journey and though she has gone far, this isn't yet her "further journey." She has a long way to go before she has built the strong container that she will need in her first half of life so that she can take her "further journey" into the second half. But there is hope, because no matter what journey we are on, we can be sure that Christ is prepared to go to hell and back again with us and for us. So I pray for

this old woman and this young one. They have each fallen down a lot. I pray that, by God's grace, they will experience some falling up. They have lost a lot, and so it is my hope that they are ready to be found. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.
Amen.