

“Faith Inferiority Complex”

Acts 9:1-6

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There are certain moments in life that necessitate the use of the phrase, “No pressure.”

- Your boss walks into your office at 4pm on Friday afternoon and casually requests a draft of a new report on her desk by Monday morning. No pressure.
- Your new mother-in-law calls out of the blue. She is on her way to Vermont and will be driving through your town, can she stop by for dinner? Nothing fancy. No pressure.
- Your fourth grade son comes home and announces that he forgot he needs to make a replica of the state capital out of popsicle sticks. It's due tomorrow. No pressure.

And my personal favorite: Your preaching schedule is set in the fall, but several months later you realize that you just happen to be preaching immediately before your congregation will be voting whether or not to call you as their next Associate Minister. No pressure.

We are told no pressure, or we might just repeat the phrase over and over in our heads, trying to convince ourselves of its truth, but what we really mean is: THERE IS A LOT OF PRESSURE! “No pressure” is the bridge between what is being said, and what we believe is actually expected of us. Sometimes that heightened expectation is made up in our heads, but sometimes it is very real.

Saul's encounter with Jesus is a story that is often used to demonstrate how our lives can be transformed when we turn away from evil and let God in. It's only one of the most dramatic demonstrations and testimonies of personal transformation in the great history of our faith. Whenever I hear Saul's dramatic conversion story on the road to Damascus, and think about the amazing way in which God transformed his life, I usually add in my mind: “And to the rest of you, as you think about your own encounters with God, don't worry if they don't compare to Saul's. No pressure!” No pressure

to the rest of us trying to do good by God but who might be left wondering, “Why hasn't God stopped me in my tracks? How does one get chosen for a mega encounter? Where is my drama and voice from above and when is Jesus going to appear before me?” It's also not uncommon to think, “If Saul's story is our example of being called to a life of faith, what do I have to offer? Have I really ever been called?”

Saul's story sets up a huge expectation that being called by God is going to be an earth shattering moment, where we are forced to stop and obey, and where we may even be blinded by God's light. It is difficult to top a story like Saul's—it is probably downright impossible to best him. Two thousand years later, with his grand conversion still fresh in our minds, is it any wonder that someone innocently inquiring about our faith journey can elicit panic and terror in even the most grounded of people? Six words—tell me about your faith journey. Six words that always elicit the same deer in the headlights look and the same two word response: Who, ME?!?! This is a symptom of a very serious condition called the faith **inferiority** complex.

The faith inferiority complex is what happens when we are conditioned to believe that our stories and our experiences are not as important or as meaningful as anyone else. If you've ever listened to someone share their faith journey and thought, “Boy, what have I ever done? I'm boring compared to her,” then you might have a faith inferiority complex. We live in an age where television ministers seem to make major miracles happen every day at 4, 6, and 11pm. We live in a world where inspirational stories and tales of nobodies turned into somebodies are passed through our email boxes and on our Facebook feeds daily. We can only hear so many of these stories before we start thinking, “What are we missing? Why does my little life seem so quiet in comparison?” After awhile, we start to think our lives don't have much impact, or maybe we don't have enough faith. Maybe we will never compare to them. We'll never be Saul.

Here's the thing, we don't really want to be like Saul. Sure, he met Jesus which I personally think is a pretty big deal, but Saul also did a lot of horrible things. We know Saul transformed and did

amazing work in the name of God, but he started in a very dark, troubled place. He did some really awful things to people. We're not expected to do such a complete turn around—mostly, our lives aren't as dramatic as his was. We're not supposed to compare ourselves to Saul, we're not supposed to read his story and develop a faith inferiority complex. The story of Saul's experience on the road to Damascus isn't really about Saul—it's about God.

This is a story that tells us that God is at work, transforming the world, and our lives in the world, every single day. It's also a story that tells us that even when we think someone is devoid of all goodness, that they have done the worst things possible, God still loves them. God still moves in their lives, and most beautiful of all—God forgives them. Saul was persecuting followers of Jesus, and Jesus forgave him. I love that. What I learned on the road to Damascus is that forgiveness is transformative, and God offers forgiveness to everyone. This isn't a story about Saul's power, this is a story about God's power, and God's power is demonstrated through forgiveness. Amen to that.

When Saul asks who is speaking to him, Jesus says, “It is me, the one you are hunting down.” In another version of the story, Jesus says, “I am the one you are persecuting.” Jesus is the voice of the people who Saul hurt. Jesus spoke up on behalf of those who were too weak to be heard on their own—and Saul listened. This is a detail that I think hugely resonates to our modern world. No matter who we are, if we are sitting here in the pews in Glastonbury, CT, United States of America, we are coming from some kind of privilege. It is a bit different for everyone, but it might be the access to a phenomenal public education, it might be having a job that allows us to feed our family, it might be healthcare that makes expensive medical treatments affordable, or it might be as simple as access to clean water whenever we need it. As Christians, we understand that even as we live with these privileges and others like them, there are people who do without. Often these privileges are invisible to us—we might go through an average day not realizing what we have or what others don't have. But, like Saul, there are times when a voice speaks up and we hear, “Why are you persecuting me? Do you know that you are hurting me?”

This connection resonates with me when I think of the issue of gay marriage before the Supreme Court. For a long time, people might not have realized that some gays and lesbians even wanted to get married. Then, once we realized that and gay marriage was legalized in Connecticut, there was a period when many of us didn't realize that federal recognition of that marriage was important. Today, we are hearing voices saying, "This matters. We need this and by denying our right to have our marriage recognized, we are suffering." We are called to speak up against this injustice. God is still speaking to us. When we hear voices of those who face injustice—whether it is the LGBT community, haitian refugees, immigrants, or anyone else—we hear God's voice. Like Saul, we may have been unable to see that our actions have caused harm, either explicitly or implicitly, but inevitably our awareness is raised, and we are able to be blind no more. God offers forgiveness, even when we have hurt others. God transforms this world, by bringing peace to places where there was once pain. God is still speaking to us and through us, not unlike Jesus did to Saul.

I haven't even gotten to my favorite part of the story. It's a really great part. So, we know that the Damascus Road encounter is more about God than about Saul, and is about God's forgiveness, and we know that God is still transforming the world, helping us to see places where there is injustice and asking us to help bring justice there. We've got that down, and that's all Good News. The other Good News is that Saul wasn't expected to figure this out on his own—Jesus sent Ananias to help him. Saul's journey is not the journey of one man—it is the journey of one who accepted the help of another, who brought Saul into a whole community of believers to demonstrate the life of Christian faith. Saul may have stayed forever blind, had it not been for that one person reaching out, welcoming him, blessing him, and praying with him. How many of us have someone in our life who pointed us in the right direction when we were heading down the wrong road? God transforms our lives through the people who we meet that open our eyes and help us to live in a new, different way. It's my favorite part! We're not supposed to do this alone. Thank goodness we are not alone. We have one another, to guide each other, to hold each other, and to affirm one another and to say that yes, what you do matters, and yes,

God is at work in your life.

This morning's story isn't an invitation to compare our quiet lives of faith to the likes of Saul's big spectacular conversion. It's an invitation to look for the ways in which God transforms the world around us. Saul's encounter on the road to Damascus is an invitation to discern where there is injustice and work to move to a place of justice. And, this is an invitation to be led by someone who has been there before us. Instead of feeling unworthy, allow them to be your guide. Or, if you are there and you can see God and you are working for justice, reach out your hand and invite someone to join you.

Finally, I'd like to invite you to join me in singing the first verse of Amazing Grace. This hymn sums it all up. On another Sunday, a true “no pressure” Sunday, I might have just let this song be the entire sermon, because it says it all. When we stumble in finding the words to tell our own stories, or when we struggle in owning the importance of our faith lives, the words of Amazing Grace remind us of the transformation that is possible and is present in each of us: the grace of God that guides us, ever quietly, ever faithfully, the same grace that enables us to see when we've been blinded.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

I once was lost, but now am found

was blind but now I see.