

Christ Revealed in Us: From Me to We

Galatians 1:13-16, II Corinthians 13:5-6

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You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being

Galatians 1:13-16

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed...

II Corinthians 13:5-6

Opening

We continue our all-church exploration of themes in Richard Rohr's book *The Universal Christ*. As I am rereading it and making notes, I am reminding myself to savor, to go slow, to pause when I read something that either deeply resonates in me or in those moments of "Yes. That is what I have always believed or have come to in my life and faith." And then there are moments when I read something and say, "Huh. That is a new insight." That is where I am beginning today. And it has to do with Rohr's invitation to look at the story of Saul later Paul.

I don't really like Paul. Wait. Let me say that differently. My theology and experience of the Spirit moving in my life has come mainly through story and poetry of the Bible and literature. Storytelling. Narrative. Jeffrey and I are very different as pastors in that respect. I have an English degree. He majored in Philosophy. Paul was a scholar, a philosopher. When I read his letters in the Bible, the sentences in Greek and English can go on and on..... Complicated construction. Complex ideas. And often passages from his letters are taken out of context and then I find I am responding to lines like, "Women shall not speak in church." That is another sermon.

So today I come to you confessing – I am not a fan of Paul. But having read and reflected on Rohr's insights and invitation, I see Paul much differently.

Paul - Background and Awakening

Rohr makes some bold assertions about Paul like - Surely the biblical writer who most helps us discover the Christ Mystery is Paul. Letters by Paul or influenced by him form one third of the New Testament. Paul is a foundational teacher for what became Christianity. Yet he never met Jesus and never quotes Jesus. He did, however, encounter the Christ – the cosmic Christ.

Saul was a leader, a Jewish scholar, and committed to maintaining the sacred laws and community. He was breathing threats and arresting men and women who were part of a small sect called "The Way" - Jews and Gentiles following the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. At this point, Saul/Paul was a black and white thinker, dividing the world into good guys and bad guys.

As Saul was traveling on the road to Damascus, suddenly a light from above 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?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. People brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight.

Saul was an enemy of the early church. But after Jesus or we might say the Christ appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, everything changed, including his name. When Ananias put his hands on Paul's eyes, a whole new world opened for Paul.

Paul saw grace. He saw freedom. He saw forgiveness. He saw a whole world of people who needed to know this good news of Christ's love and grace. This sent his life in a brand new direction.

All of Paul's major themes are contained in seed form in his conversion experience, of which there are three descriptions in Acts (9, 22, and 26). Scholars assume that Acts was written by Luke around 80-90 CE (Common Era), about twenty years after Paul wrote most of his letters.

Rohr suggests that one way to read the Bible is that it involves gradually developing a very different consciousness, a recreated self, and eventually a full "identity transplant" or identity realization, as we see in Paul. The sacred text invites us, little by little, into a very different sense of who we are: We are not our own. Your life is not about you; you are about Life! You are beloved. We gradually find ourselves part of the Great Vine, eventually realizing that we have never truly been separate from that Source (John 15:1-5). Once we are consciously connected to the True Vine, our life will bear much fruit for the world.

Paul seems to understand this well because it happened rather dramatically to him. He writes, "I live no longer, not I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Like Paul, the spiritual journey leads us to know that Someone Else is living in us and through us. We are part of a much Bigger Mystery. We are recipients, conduits, and gradually become fully willing participants in the Christ Mystery.

Paul has a deep intuitive conviction about the flow of Divine Love passing through him. He comes to know that he is hardly "initiating" anything, but instead it is all happening to him.

Some would say he had a dramatic conversion. I prefer to say it was more of an awakening. It is not about joining a new group or church; it is coming to know a new and essential self that is interconnected with everyone and everything else.

He moves from persecutor to preacher, from “my way and my righteousness” to **mystic**. That is a term Rohr uses. That was a big shift for me. Paul moved from “I am on a mission to find and arrest those people who are following Jesus” to “The Holy One has called me and us to join together. There is a unity in Christ.”

En Christo

Paul summarizes this new view of himself, of Christ, of reality, of communal transformation with his shorthand phrase “en Cristo,” using it more than any single phrase in all of his letters (over 100 times). *En Cristo* seems to be Paul’s code phrase for the gracious, participatory experience of salvation and transformation, the path that he so urgently wanted to share with the world. This identity means humanity has never been separate from God—unless and except by its own negative choice. All of us, without exception, are living inside of a cosmic identity, already in place, that is drawing and guiding us forward. We are all *en Cristo*, willingly or unwillingly, happily or unhappily, consciously or unconsciously. A move from me to we.

Regrettably, Christians have not protected this radical awareness of oneness with the divine and all creation. Paul’s brilliant understanding of a communal Christ, and thus our cosmic identity, was soon lost as early Christians focused more and more on Jesus alone.

Not creeds

Rohr reminds us of church history and power dynamics. People following the ways of Jesus were being invited to see with new eyes. But too often the church resorted to creeds about believing and what made you a real Christian or not, instead seeing creeds as one expression of this mystery.

Presbyterians are known for being people of the Word and lots of words. Not bad, but maybe there are times we worship the words instead of the mystery to which they point. Creeds are helpful and can give us one set of lenses to see the church and theology in the various contexts of history.

Apostles Creed written around 450 CE (Common Era) - first lines

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son Our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead;

What if the creeds have been and are used to keep people out? What if creeds too often kept dualistic thinking going - either/or, sacred/secular, matter/spirit, insiders/outsideers? Rohr is

saying what if our faith, our experience of the Holy, of Christ, is not primarily individual but is deeply communal and we don't always have the right words? Instead, turn to Paul, the mystic.

Communal

Paul began preaching a unity in Christ and that the Body of Christ was whole and connected. Until our experience of Divine love and grace sinks in, we cannot comprehend most of Jesus' and Paul's teachings. Before awakening, we tend to think of God as "out there." After transformation, we don't look out at reality as if it is hidden in the distance. We look out from reality! Our life is participating in God's Life. We are living in Christ. It changes us.

Becoming Who we Already Are

What happens in an awakening like Paul? What might happen in our reading and small groups? What might be new? What may affirm what we have believed and experienced?

"I don't feel alone. I know Christ is with me and in me."

"I feel a purpose in my life."

"I experience meaning for my life through worship services, contemplative practices and being a compassionate partner in our community."

"I can depend on people from my church to stand by me through tough times."

"I know I am a part of God's work in the world."

"I have hope." ...

"I have peace in my heart."

Then rest you can rest in the awareness that you are already and forever, without any effort or achievement on your part, a beloved child of God. We are becoming who we already are. This is an invitation to inner aliveness. God uses goodness, truth and beauty to draw us out and experience this deeper connection.

Closing Story

Most of us don't have a dramatic moment of conversion or awakening. Our experience of deepening awareness of the Holy is gradual and nurtured by people in our lives. And yet we can hear more clearly what can happen when our eyes and hearts are opened. We can appreciate this lifelong leaning and opening and deepening as we seek to follow the ways of Jesus and trust in this reality of the Christ Mystery.

I recently read an article about another dramatic awakening. It took years but the change and outcome are powerful.

Many people in Topeka, Kan., first became aware of the Westboro Baptist Church in the early 1990s, when members began what would become their trademark public action: picketing to protest what they saw as the ills of an ungodly world. Megan Phelps-Roper was 5 years old when it began; as a little girl, she stood with her parents and other family members holding picket signs warning of gay people in the city's Gage Park.

Eventually Westboro made itself known far beyond one small Midwestern city, with members — including young children — brandishing signs saying things like "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" at the funerals of service members, "God Sent the Shooter" at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and the infamous "God Hates Fags."

In *Unfollow: A Memoir of Loving and Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church*, Phelps-Roper tells her story of growing up in Westboro a beloved and valued granddaughter of the church's founder, and the torturous choice she made in her late 20s to leave it behind.

She was the eldest daughter in a family of 11 siblings and often helped with the legal and logistical work required to carry off the picketing missions. Immersed in her grandfather's preaching, she believed that "Westboro was the only safe haven from the wrath of God, both in this life and in the world to come." But slowly, after graduating from college and law school, she began to wonder whether her family was right in its theology, its worldview of enemies and sin, obedience and hatred. She eventually left as her eyes and heart were transformed.

Leaving was wrenching, despite its clear necessity. And life after Westboro was disorienting. Phelps-Roper had to face the guilt over "years I had wasted hurting people in a misguided effort to serve an image of a God that seemed less real all the time."

After she and others left, she wrote: "We could cease presuming most people were evil and ill-intentioned. The hope that sprang from this realization would become the new foundation of my life.... "Westboro is not unique." Other groups, religious and otherwise, convince their members that they alone hold the one true way. One thing all those groups have in common is a fear of the other. I want to tell my parents and others that the world isn't evil. That it's full and complicated and beautiful and good, filled with unknown truths and unbroken hopes, and that it's waiting just for them."

May we find hope in the story of Megan Phelps-Roper and for her awakening and transformation from a life of hate to a life in Christ's love and connection. May we find hope in the writings of Rohr's good friend Marcus Borg who offered new ways of seeing Jesus and the church for many. May we be open to Richard Rohr's invitation to see how we can experience this Christ Mystery, this communal experience of living and sharing in Life, a life that has gradual moments of shifting and seeing and recommitting to love and kindness, even when we don't have the right words or we use too many words or we are left speechless. Amen.

Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (Convergent: 2019), pp. 39-53

Christ in Paul's Eyes: Weekly Summary <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/> 3/2/2019