

IF I COULD TURN BACK TIME

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Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:58)

Most of us can look back on moments that we've come to regret. We wonder how all of life might have gone differently had we not done the thing we ought not to have done, or left undone that thing we ought to have done. One of those moments for me occurred in deep left-center field of an old minor league baseball stadium in Sioux Falls, SD. It was the summer of 1980. I had just graduated from high school and was playing American Legion baseball on a team called the Blackbirds. I was in center field, which was exactly where I wanted to be. I had spent a good part of my teenage years chasing down fly balls that my father would hit to me out of his hand. I loved standing way in close, and then racing back to catch the ones he'd hit over my head. Many, many a summer evening we'd be out there until it was too dark to see. Although I knew I had neither the bat nor the throwing arm to go far in the game, I was confident that I could run down and catch any ball that came my way.

The opportunity to show off what I could do came upon me one night when we were in extra innings. The opposing team from a town called Huron had a man on first with two outs. Our pitcher delivered, the batter swung, and the ball shot like a meteor toward the deepest part of left-center field. I knew right off the bat that if I were to have any chance to make the play I would have to turn my back to home and run like the wind. This I did. My moment had come. Still on the run, nearing the outfield wall, I finally looked over my left shoulder, and there it was. Floating above me, strangely suspended in time was the ball. Forty years later, I can still see it, and I can still hear the left fielder, who had also given chase, shout my name, indicating it was mine. I still want to reach and leap in that frozen split second and snag the ball. But forty years ago I flinched. I hesitated. I reached, but I didn't leap, and I didn't catch the ball I ought to have caught. Why didn't I jump? If I could turn back time I would find a way. I would go airborne and make the impossible catch.

In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles we've heard a passage that at first seems to be a jagged fit in the season of Eastertide: the stoning of Stephen. As the Jerusalem church began to take shape in the days following the resurrection of Jesus, Stephen was a person of firsts. He was among the first group of people whom the Apostles ordained as deacons – a new ministry devoted to service at the Eucharistic meal, and service to the poor and neglected of society. Then, due to a particularly fiery sermon he preached in the hearing of the high priest and other Temple officials, Stephen became the first Christian martyr – the first person to pay with his life for proclaiming the gospel. Remarkably, the last words on Stephen's lips, as his executioners continued to hurl rocks and stones upon him, was a prayer: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

Nevertheless, the person in today's reading who caught my attention this week is not Stephen, but rather the *young man named Saul*. Here we have the first mention of a figure who would shape the early church more than any other Christian. But who was Saul? Saul of Tarsus was a particular type of first-century Jew. He wasn't just a Jew, but a Pharisee, which meant that he belonged to a party that was set apart from the rank and file for their devotion to the Law of Moses. But Saul wasn't just a Pharisee. It is likely that he belonged to the strictest wing of the

Pharisees, a sect called the “Shammaites.” The Shammaites believed that true devotion to the Law involved not just following the Commandments, but ridding the Jews of their Gentile overlords and anyone else who would corrupt the purity of Israel. Among the Shammaites were Zealots, those who took an active, even violent hand to resist any foreign, corrupting presence among the Jews.

N.T. Wright is a Church of England bishop and perhaps the finest New Testament scholar of the past generation. Wright concludes that Saul’s frequent use of the word “zeal” to describe his life as a Pharisee, combined with his authority to persecute Christians, strongly suggests he was a Shammaite Pharisee.¹ Thus as we meet him today, Saul was an enemy of Jesus, presiding over and approving of the stoning of Stephen. What is more, Saul had permission to chase the Christians to other cities and drag them back to Jerusalem for punishment. It was during one such trip, on the road to Damascus, when Saul met the risen Jesus. The experience turned his life upside down, and the greatest persecutor of the church became its greatest proponent. Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle.

In the years that followed, Paul would pour his life into building up the church, and he left a remarkable record of letters that comprise much of the New Testament. One of those letters we call Second Corinthians, and in it Paul wrote of a persistent, nagging, thorn in the flesh that harassed him. What was it? Speculation has abounded, and no one can be entirely sure. But I have always wondered if what Paul was writing about was guilt and regret over what he had done to Stephen, and presumably many others. How could he un-see the sight of Stephen bleeding and dying at his own feet? How could he un-hear the last words of Stephen, praying for the souls of his executioners? How could he stop the memory loop from playing in his mind? The witness of Stephen (which is what the word martyr means, by the way: witness) proved to be a blessing and a burden for Paul. It was a blessing because it was instrumental in Paul’s conversion, but it was a burden because it must have weighed on his conscience for the rest of his life. If Paul could turn back time, surely he would reach and jump. He would reach into the pit and pull Stephen out of it. Or he would jump in himself and shield him from the stones.

All of us remember those moments we wish we could do over. Like Saul, we have done those things which we ought not to have done. You brought your worst self to an encounter with a child or a loved one and you can’t take it back. You spoke words that were meant to hurt, and they did, and you can’t unsay them. You followed the crowd when you knew it was wrong. And we have left undone those things which we ought to have done. You were not there when someone craved your presence. You missed the train. You did not intervene, you did not speak up, you did not reach or jump. Missing a fly ball in a high school baseball game is a trivial thing, but it can serve as a metaphor of the regrets that dog us.

How would life be different if you’d turned right instead of left, or if had I caught that ball? Let’s rewind the tape and hit play. Clearly, catching the ball would have changed my life! It would have resulted in a scholarship to a bigger and better college. Then I would have been noticed by professional scouts and drafted by a major league team. I would have made millions playing centerfield and endorsing products on TV. Next, after a successful career I would have answered the call to the priesthood, met Stacie, and come to Grace Church. James and Luke would be a bit younger, but everything else would be remarkably the same with one major league difference: capital campaign time. You the people of Grace Church would not have to fork over as much as you do because with the stroke of my pen I, the rich rector, would cover it. I would say, “Woah, we need a new roof here and there. Let’s have a capital campaign. On second thought, nah, I got this!” Don’t you wish I’d caught that ball? Alas, if we could turn back time we’d all be happier. Of course, I’m being silly, but do you see how it works? Our lives can be a trail of regret over

missed opportunities, wrong turns, things done and left undone. The old Book of Common Prayer had a wonderful phrase for our regrets: *the burden of them is intolerable*.

Jesus said, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.*” Could it be that in Jesus we can find relief from the intolerable burden of guilt and regret? The first thing to remember is that we follow not a dead dispenser of lovely words. What we proclaim in Eastertide is that Christ is risen. Jesus lives. Indeed, the reason we hear the story of Stephen at this time of year is because of what he perceived in his final moments: not a person from the past, but the living Jesus, *standing at the right hand of God*. What Paul perceived on the road to Damascus was the same: the risen, living, acting Jesus inviting him to take hold of the life that really is life. The invitation is the same to us, even today. We heard in the First Letter of Peter (2:2-10): *Come to him, a living stone ... who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*. So it is that the living Jesus said and says, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.*” These are living words of the Word made flesh, and when we encounter them, his Spirit intermingles with our spirits.

Jesus declares that belief in God and belief in himself is what can lead to the un-troubling of your heart. What he means here by belief is not mere intellectual assent to the existence of God, but a willingness to trust in the direction of God. What direction? Note the forward momentum of Jesus’ succeeding words: “*I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you for myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*” Jesus’ words invite us not to a backwards dwelling on the sins and offenses of our youth, but on a pilgrimage with him into God’s future. To believe is to trust that the living Jesus is the one to take us into God’s future, where our best years are eternally ahead of us, not behind us. It’s why Jesus went on to say, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*”

We have many questions, not the least of which is what on earth Jesus meant by the final words of the passage: “*If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*” Really? Anything? What about unanswered prayers, like those of St. Paul, who pleaded that God would remove his thorn in the flesh? The answers are often slow in coming, even for someone like Paul. He finally concluded that his thorn in the flesh remained in order to keep him humble. It was necessary in the ongoing process of his being renewed in the image of Christ. Paul would later write: *Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14)*.

Still we wonder: is it really possible to move on with Christ and forget what lies behind? What about the people we’ve hurt or neglected? What of the opportunities we squandered, the wrong turns we took due to our own stubborn willfulness, and the light of Christ we hid under a basket out of fear or jealousy? Here I remember the scene earlier in John’s Gospel, when Jesus fed five thousand people in the wilderness (6:1-14). After all in the great company had eaten their fill, Jesus looked at a field strewn with broken bread crumbs. It was a trail of wreckage composed of what had been the miraculous gift of God. It could well represent the story of our lives.

What did Jesus say? *Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing may be lost*. Indeed, John 6:12 goes down as one of my favorite Scripture verses. We press on into God’s future trusting in Jesus, leaving the guilt and regret with him. We trust that he gathers up the fragments that remain, that nothing may be lost.

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¹ Wright, N.T., What Saint Paul Really Said. Lion Publishing, 1997, p. 26ff.