

NEVER TRUST A SHARK

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Grace Church in New York
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And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized. (Acts 9:18)

Last Tuesday evening it was my pleasure to attend the annual benefit for the GO Project, the remarkable tutoring and social service agency that had its beginnings at Grace Church and Grace Church School, and continues to involve numerous people from both communities. So it was fun to be there to support an incredibly worthy cause, and participate in the festivities, part of which was a live auction.

One of the items on the auction block was nothing less than a shark expedition. The price was beyond the means of a humble country parson, so I wasn't raising my paddle. But the winning bidder and three friends will board a research vessel for a three-day voyage to study North Atlantic white sharks. Apparently, the expedition involves catching the sharks, bringing them onboard, touching them, tagging them, and then releasing back into the ocean. If memory serves, the promo video showed a group of children gathered around a live shark in the process of being tagged, and petting it. I understand that sharks are a vital part of the ecosystem and that we should work to protect them. I am a big fan of Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom where the wolf dwells with the lamb. But the notion of getting up close to a live shark, even a restrained shark, gives me the willies. I've seen *Jaws*. I've read the book. Never trust a shark.

As I watched the promo video, let me tell you what came to mind. It wasn't *Jaws*, but rather a scene from the animated movie *Finding Nemo*. Nemo is a little clown fish that lives in the Great Barrier Reef. One day he and a fish friend name Dory come upon a huge menacing great white shark named Bruce. When Bruce, baring his rows and rows of razor sharp teeth, invites the little fish back to his place for a party with some other sharks, Nemo and Dory fear they will be eaten. But no, the party turns out to be a 12-step meeting for sharks who want to amend their lives. They repeat a pledge: *I am a nice shark, not a mindless eating machine. If I am to change this image, I must first change myself. Fish are friends, not food.* Sad to say, Bruce's conversion can't withstand the slightest temptation. When Dory gets a little scrape, a faint scent of blood reaches Bruce's highly sensitive shark nostrils, and he goes into a frenzy declaring, "I'm having fish tonight!" Never trust a shark.

In today's reading from the Book of Acts (9:1-20) we hear the story of a man whom some would have considered to be a shark in the waters of religion. Saul of Tarsus was not a nice shark, nor was he interested in changing his image. Quite the contrary, Saul breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. Saul was a first-century Pharisee, which meant that he belonged to a Jewish 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 God's chosen people.

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 Saul was an enemy of Jesus. Saul presided over and approved of the stoning of Stephen, a

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

deacon in the Jerusalem church and first Christian martyr. Saul had permission to chase the Christians to other cities and drag them back to Jerusalem for punishment. No doubt about it, Saul was a shark. But his image was about to change completely and forever. On the road to Damascus, in pursuit of any Christians who were in hiding there, Saul met the risen Lord Jesus in a blinding light from heaven. I won't rehash the story because we just heard it a moment ago. What is more, today's reading is just the first of three times the Book of Acts tells us of the same incident. We find a fourth account in the Letter of Paul to the Galatians. Clearly, Saul's Damascus Road experience was the signature event of his life. When the scales fell from his eyes, he looked in the mirror and saw not just a nice shark, but a new creation. He was changed. Saul became Paul. The persecutor became the preacher. Fish became friends.

Personally, whenever I read of Paul's dramatic conversion I find myself feeling a mixture of envy, fear, and suspicion. I am envious because Paul came to experience something for which we all yearn: a sustained, vivid awareness of Christ's living presence. For Paul, Jesus was not an idea or a philosophy or a dead teacher. Rather, Jesus was his constant companion whose Spirit empowered him to accomplish much good. I yearn for such conversion in myself. Yes, I am a lifelong, churchgoing Episcopalian, and I'm grateful for every bit of it. But I yearn for an ever-deepening experience of God's presence. I yearn for it, but I also fear it. Conversion is one thing, losing control is another thing entirely. How much of my personality would I have to relinquish so that I could say, as did Paul, *it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me?* Thus, to be completely honest with you, I know that a part of me works to hold the line against further conversion of my inner landscape. I fear it.

I'm also suspicious of what I've seen in those who undergo sudden, dramatic, even deathbed conversions. Not long ago I watched a documentary² about the late political consultant Lee Atwater. No doubt about it, Atwater was a shark swimming in the waters of 1980s partisan politics. He was not only a practitioner but a perfecter of the organized smear campaign that could destroy the personal and professional reputations of opposing candidates. Then in March of 1990 Atwater was diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer. When it became clear that his illness was terminal he converted the Roman Catholic Church, and began apologizing to all the people he'd hurt in his political career. Many were surprised by the change in Atwater. In some cases the wounds he'd inflicted were still raw, but how do you refuse the apology of a dying person? Atwater claimed that reading a *Living Bible* he'd received as a gift was sustaining him. When he finally died just a year after his diagnosis, some aids were cleaning out his office and came across the Bible. Strangely, it was still wrapped in cellophane. Atwater had never opened it. "Aha," we say. "His conversion wasn't real." Or was it? We'll never know. In the meantime, never trust a shark.

Why then should we trust the conversion of Saul the shark to Paul the Apostle? Perhaps the reason is because Paul's conversion wasn't as sudden and dramatic as we might think. If you recall, today's reading from Acts is one of three accounts of what happened. The other two, much later in the book, are narrated by Paul himself. In the 26th chapter he reports that what Jesus said to him was, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" And then this line: "*It hurts you to kick against the goads.*" The expression, "kick against the goads," suggests not a sudden conversion but a long, slow process by which the grace of God had been working to transform Saul. A goad was a pointed tool that a farmer would attach to a cart to dissuade the oxen from going in the wrong direction. Stubborn oxen would resist the farmer's direction and kick against the goad, inflicting harm upon themselves. Once the oxen learned to stop resisting the unbending will of the farmer, everyone would win – both oxen and farmer.

Applied to Paul, the expression suggests that a number of goads had been stabbing at his conscience. What were they? Some have speculated that Saul had actually encountered Jesus during his earthly ministry, prior to the crucifixion. Perhaps they'd even met face to face.³ Think about it. They were contemporaries, each in his own way ardently devoted to the kingdom of God. If Saul were

² "Boogie Man: The Lee Atwater Story," directed by Stefan Forbes, 2008.

³ Stott, John R. W., The Spirit, the Church, and the World. Intervarsity Press, 1990, p. 171.

really the zealous Pharisee he claimed to be, it's entirely plausible that he would have sought out or at least gone to hear the popular preacher who was commanding the attention of his fellow Jews. Had such a meeting indeed occurred, we can only imagine how the effect of Jesus went to work on Saul's inner life. Frankly, it might explain why Saul tried so furiously to stamp out the Christian movement. He knew that Jesus' version of the kingdom was closer to the mind of God than was his own.

Another goad working slowly but surely on Saul's inner life might have been the deacon, Stephen. Saul had been a witness to Stephen's death. He had seen the expression on the martyr's face, and had heard him pray for the forgiveness of his executioners. No doubt Saul had witnessed the same Spirit of Christ in others whom he persecuted. For a while he kicked harder against the goads but finally bowed to will of God. Thus, the Damascus Road experience was likely the culmination of a long process, not something that came from completely out of the blue. What is more, Paul's conversion wasn't ever complete. He never considered himself a finished product. Years later Paul would write to the Philippians of how he wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection: *not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own (3:12).*

My hope today is that you and I will be open to the ongoing grace of God that is at work to convert our souls. In this regard I think of someone who was associated with Grace Church exactly one-hundred years ago. Samuel Shoemaker had grown up in Baltimore, and was raised in a fine, churchgoing, Episcopalian family. Of his upbringing he would write, *"I thank God for all those early associations and for what I learned. It had turned me towards religion and decided me on the ministry. But this is not enough."*⁴ After college at Princeton, Shoemaker signed on to be a missionary to China, sponsored by some fellow alumni. Once there he began a Bible class for young Chinese businessmen who were curious about Christianity. They would meet in Shoemaker's room and twenty people attended the first class. Fourteen came to the second class. Seven came to the third. Shoemaker was distraught. He consulted an older colleague who suggested the problem was his own stubborn will. Even though Shoemaker was a missionary who had devoted his life to Christ, still he was kicking against goads, insisting on his own way, not open to the direction of God. He would write, *"Some of us have wills like a bar of iron, and it is hard to break them and let God's will come into their place. I faced as honestly as I could my sins and got down on my knees and gave them to God, and my will with them. I felt no emotion about this and saw no stars nor bright lights; but afterwards I felt light and at ease, as if life had slipped into its right groove at last.*

When Shoemaker returned from China he enrolled at General Seminary, was ordained a priest, and briefly served as the young, eager Assistant Rector of Grace Church. Indeed, he was in the early 1920s what Thomas Szczerba is in the early 2020s, except a century ago the Assistant Rector's name was easier to spell than it is today. Sam Shoemaker went on to become Rector of Calvary Church on Park Avenue, where he would serve for over 25 years. While there he was crucial to the founding and developing of Alcoholics Anonymous, a worldwide ministry that continues to this day. The 12 Steps may not have worked on Bruce the Shark, but for millions of others it has brought them out of death to life. Shoemaker's particular contribution was the spiritual component. He knew that people could change by the power of God because the power of God had changed him.

It is the same power of God that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, and rescued Saul from his death-dealing ways on the Damascus Road. It is the same power of God that will not rest until the scales fall from every eye, even ours, and we see God not as a stranger, but as our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend.

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⁴ Famous Conversions, Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder, editors. Eerdmans, 1983, p. 196.