

A Conversion of Conscience

Acts 9:1-6

Yesterday, Francine Wheeler did something that no one else has done. She, as an average citizen of the United States, delivered the weekly Presidential address. Francine, of course, is no ordinary American citizen. She is the mother of Ben, a six-year-old who was among the murdered four months ago to this day at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown.

Francine, who was flanked by her husband, David, offered her perspective on gun control to a nationwide audience, not because she was a resident expert on the subject or a political pundit advocating from an ideological side of this controversial issue. She was speaking as a broken-hearted mother who knows firsthand the tragedy that random gun violence brings to an individual household and a small town in suburban America. The power of her testimony comes from her conviction that for all the reasons and causes behind gun violence in our nation, something significant has to be done to address it—whatever can be done, should be done—a conviction based on their horrible experience of December 14, when she sent her son off to school and then later waited in stunned sorrow at the Sandy Hook firehouse for the news that he was not coming home. Francine and David, along with a grieving nation, will not forget that day, but they will remember it personally as the moment the life of their family and community changed forever...and not for the better.

The cynics steeped in this debate have already dismissed the Wheeler's tearful plea, complaining that it was coached to be manipulative and staged only to push the President's political agenda.

Instead of being moved by compassion, they push back, unmoved by human tears. Understandably, those who have not felt firsthand the anguish of such a tragic loss only approach the issue on the basis of self-interest or ideological principle—both of which are legitimate bases for generating and justifying people’s opinions or thoughts on any issue. Short of the passion associated with a convictional, life-changing experience, we all make our judgments about gun violence based on what seems reasonable and fair, or out of self-interest, be it personal or ideological.

That’s how everyone generates an opinion on any subject—by appealing to reason or to self-interests or to certain principles and values that shape and guide our worldviews. We organize our thinking and perceptions of what is right based on things like religious beliefs, social or political ideologies, inherited and cultivated values, and the like. If we care enough about a particular issue, we may even become impassioned by the *idea* of winning the argument or for pushing the cause. But unless we experience something personally that affects our thinking in one way or another, we normally leave it at that—as an opinion we hold that may or may not change based on the information we have or the people we’re around.

I would imagine Francine and David Wheeler, and the many other people directly impacted by the violence at Sandy Hook, or by violence in their own communities and households before and since December 14—of which there are thousands upon thousands in this country alone—that very few of these grief-stricken and angry people were even deeply engaged in the politics of gun violence prior to becoming a victim of it. It’s taken the experience—the moment that

has scarred their memories—to change their thinking and view of reality, or to motivate them to stand up and bring attention to this terrible problem—a transforming moment when maybe, just maybe, they might be able to help lessen the amount of violence that has ruined so many lives.

Convictional experiences are what really change us as human beings. We can believe anything and everything we want to; we can base our lives on certain principles and values and aspirations without ever having them severely tested and challenged. But when we have an experience that does just that, then the power of that memory is enough to radically change us to a whole new way of life and thinking. It takes conviction to muster the courage to undo what we have always thought, to reorder and realign our values, to alter what we have firmly believed, and to question and renounce things of which we were once so certain. Convictions arrive usually when we are shaken to the core of our being, when we have been stunned by a sudden new awareness, and when we have emotionally been traumatized enough that we'll never see things in quite the same way as before.

Now, not all convictional experiences are viewed negatively or traumatically. For instance, when people fall in love, that can be a convictional experience that changes their lives. When a mother gives birth, it usually is transformational—holding the little life of one who has been within her. But typically, a conversion of conscience is based on something that has simply stunned someone, enough that their world has been turned upside down.

For instance, I was thinking about how Senator Rob Portman from Ohio recently changed his thinking about same-gender marriage when his son came out as a gay man. Portman, who had vigorously stood up in the public square and in Congress denouncing any and all attempts to alter the traditional definition of marriage, surprised most everyone when he renounced his beliefs—beliefs that were changed, not due to religious or political principles, but because of the need to trust and love his son, who was seeking affirmation for who he was. Experience, for Portman and many others, became a more compelling teacher than what was held as a principle. That was a convictional experience, a conversion of his conscience.

Or we could go back to the classic story of Francis of Assisi (for whom the new Pope is named), who as a wealthy and privileged young man, had his life completely changed when he encountered a leper along the road and, instead of being repulsed and avoiding him as he had normally done up to that time, suddenly was driven to get down off his horse and kiss the man out of compassion. As the story goes, he came to see the face of Christ in him and, with that memory, Francis renounced his privileges and became one of history's greatest advocates for the poor and suffering. Again, a convictional experience that changed one man's world.

Our text for today, though, takes us even further back to the biblical story of the Apostle Paul, whose transformational encounter on the road to Damascus not only changed his life and identity, but the direction and theology of the Christian church. This story is intriguing due to the transformation of Saul, the persecutor of early Christians, into Paul, the Apostle, the greatest evangelist of the

evolving church. Though there is discrepancy in the details between the various accounts (cf. Acts 9:1-6; 22:4-16; 26:9-18; see also Galatians 1:13-17), the impact upon Paul was evident: he went from zealously trying to destroy the early church to becoming one of its chief proponents. Explaining this shift psychologically from one extreme to the other would be a psychotherapist's dream, but theologically it also challenges many of our presumptions about what it means to hold religious convictions based solely on tradition, principles, and sound reason.

To arrive at the point I'm trying to make, we have to go back to what Paul would have been like prior to his conversion of conscience—back to when he was Saul of Tarsus. In Galatians, he summarizes it in this way:

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. (Gal. 1:13-14)

So according to the record, Saul was an ambitious young man, deeply religious and committed to the traditions of his upbringing. He studied under one of the leading rabbis of his day, Gamaliel; he was a conservative Pharisee, dedicated to the Jewish identity and its protection from being contaminated by both pagan and heretical influences. In today's world, he would be a strict orthodox Jew focused on religious fidelity, with zealous passion and pious devotion to the rituals and rules of traditional Judaism. His zeal to flush out heresy was simply to protect the integrity of his religious heritage—to advocate in the corrupting world around him for the purity of God's ways as revealed in the Torah. To underscore to his dedication and

zeal, Saul was assigned the task by the chief priests in Jerusalem to be one of their enforcers (cf. Javert, in *Les Misérables*).

Now imagine, how is it that someone so consumed by his convictions and cause would become so completely transformed? Not only did he stop persecuting the church and convert to their message, Paul effectively abandoned his upbringing and his rigorous defense of his faith, at least as he understood the teachings of the Torah. He went from being a harsh law enforcer to one who proclaimed tremendous liberality and flexibility when it came to religious laws and customs that had previously dictated his own faith! How does one go from one extreme to the other in such a radical transformation?

It doesn't happen by logic or by principle. It happened only by what he experienced. Saul's experience—whatever it was that happened on the road to Damascus, however he interpreted it, in whatever way that memory was etched into his conscience and consciousness—that is what transformed Saul to the Paul we know. Everything he was taught and believed in was completely reshaped and reinterpreted and reimaged through this convictional experience. His values were reordered, his perception of God's presence and favor was reexamined, and his whole purpose in life was reevaluated. The convictional experience was the compelling cause of personal transformation. The Gospel as it was understood and applied in the New Testament and primitive church and then conveyed to the generations leading up to the present was fundamentally reformed as a result!

We would be wrong to assume that convictional experiences are only about undoing the past—that it's motivated by the failure of the old ways of thinking to account for new realities. That often happens. Fundamentalists who flee their rigid religious environments often become radically liberal—even agnostics—claiming a present identity based on what they have left. But I think that only satisfies the soul for awhile. One grows weary of merely explaining the change in your thinking based on what you are not.

What we see in Paul is something different. His conversion of conscience wasn't over the failure of his upbringing or of Jewish orthodoxy. It wasn't about a disintegration of his beliefs. Rather, it was a *discovery of a new reality*. Frequently, this is what motivates a true conversion of the heart and conscience. It's when you recognize that something else is true that you haven't noticed, or witnessed, or realized. This discovery comes through a convictional, life-transforming experience.

For example, I know folks who have undergone a near-death experience and have firsthand knowledge of a reality that the rest of us can't grasp with conviction because we haven't experienced it. It's a discovery they've known only through a remarkable moment and it completely alters their life and their worldview. They are never the same because of it.

Or, take for example, those who have changed their understanding of homosexuality, even in a religious way; they have done so not by throwing out their belief system, but typically by discovering something new about human sexuality, or about their faith, or about the power of love.

Or those who come to embrace the poor and suffering in their midst like St. Francis often do so because they discover a part of the human family that they've overlooked! Yet, their firsthand experience converts their conscience in a radically, powerful way.

Certainly, profound experiences of forgiveness and grace also have a transforming impact upon people, as they discover a way to move forward in their lives. That's the purpose and value of convictional experiences. We are changed spiritually through our experiences to turn toward new and positive purposes for living.

I sense this holds true for many of the parents of Sandy Hook. Their lives have been changed—their consciences converted—by the memories of that December day. When Francine Wheeler spoke to the world yesterday that it is time for the leaders of our country to step up and do what they can to make our society and our communities safer, it was based on a terrible, heartbreaking experience that was personal and life-changing for her. Her hope is that her story isn't one that should have to be repeated for everyone before it compels us to act as a nation to stop the violence.

She's right. We don't have to experience our own tragedies before we care enough to act. We can discover, through theirs and so many others' experiences, the need to do what we can to help those who hurt and to heal those who have been harmed and, most importantly, to prevent others from needless suffering. If we are so able to do this, if we do not forget the memory of Newtown, then maybe, just maybe, we will be transformed for the better as a people.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
14 April 2013