

“I’m NOT Making This Up”
The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, June 10, 2007

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Sermon Text: Galatians 1:11-24

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now many of you asked me what it was like being at annual conference for one day longer than we usually are at annual conference. I just ask you, when the preacher unexpectedly shows up at your door, how do you feel? Imagine about 700 preachers together for four and one-half days. It was like that. We did hear some good stories.

One guy said that he was moving, and he – by the way, to the best of my knowledge, I am not moving so you’ve got me for one more year, let’s make it a good one. (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you. One guy said that for the entire time, he had been four years where he was, this lady at the end of every sermon, and she came faithfully, but at the end of every sermon, she said, “Preacher, you are something else! You are something else!” Finally, he said, “Well, now look, I took that as a compliment at first, and then I started to wonder, and I’m moving now, and I’ve got to know. What do you meant I’m something else?” She said, “Well, you must be something else ‘cause you sure ain’t a preacher!”

I have had at least one of you say that I’m something else, and I’m starting to wonder about that, too.

Today, I want to focus on the Apostle Paul, and it is a pretty intense picture when you see how Saul changed to Paul and how the power of God was manifest in that. It is unlikely, think about it in these terms, it is unlikely, I think you’ll agree, that a Clemson graduate, a Clemson football fan, a Clemson season ticket holder, a full scholarship donor would wake up one morning and become a Gamecock fan! Isn’t that unlikely?

I think I’ve already told you that my Clemson graduate son-in-law has taught my two-year-old grandson that if anybody ever says Gamecock, he goes “Ewwww!” That’s not nice!

It is unlikely that a Duke basketball fan would suddenly become fond of that color pale blue, and pull for UNC. It is unlikely! It is unlikely that a dyed-in-the-wool generational Democrat would overnight become a Republican or vice versa! Very unlikely! Most unlikely is that someone like Osama Bin Laden, who thinks that he is serving God by promoting murder and suicide, would suddenly become a man of peace and say never mind, I was wrong, and God doesn’t want that! Most unlikely!

When you are committed by money, tradition or family loyalty, it is unlikely to change sides. When you are committed by money, tradition, family loyalty, religion and blood spilt in God’s name, it is next to impossible to imagine someone changing sides! Admitting error. Admitting guilt and turning your back on your friends, who instantly

become now your enemies. That, brothers and sisters, is what Saul did when he became Paul!

Our minds are meaning factories someone has said. We look for meaning. We look for purpose. We look for blame, and we look for trustworthiness. Our search for meaning may stop with family. It may stop with money. It may stop with tradition. It may stop with tribe or race or party or team, or it may lead upward to the ultimate meaning maker, God. I believe we were given an inner sense, a magnetic attraction, a homing device in our souls searching out truth and meaning and trustworthiness. The trouble is, even when we know, even when we know that we have stopped short on something far less than God, far less than truth, our egos get in the way. We tend to tenaciously stay where we are in matters of faith and meaning even when we suspect, even when we know that we’re wrong.

We don’t like the idea of change. Jesus said I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. When Saul met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, it was the end of his old life as a comfortable, respected, law-abiding, wealthy, influential persecutor of Christians. It was the beginning of a new life where he turned his back on all the old, comfortable connections, the good-old-boy network that he had built up, and began following the great God into unknown territory even though following God meant starting all over again! He had to begin all over again by first admitting that he had been wrong about God, wrong about faith, wrong about how righteous and good he was, and that’s hard! Some of us simply will not do it even when we know we’re wrong.

2 Corinthians 5:17 speaks about endings and beginnings. It says, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passing away, and all things are becoming new.” For Christians, there is a constant change going on, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, but your life is being reshaped. It begins when faith hits deeper than your head and penetrates all the way into your heart. As we grow in the Lord, this new life constantly changes us. We are reshaped into the image and closer to the likeness and character of Jesus Christ by the power of God’s Holy Spirit. If you are not growing and changing, then maybe your head faith has not made it all the way into your heart. Maybe.

I was talking to a younger pastor at annual conference, who was concerned about one of his two churches. He said they refuse to do anything new, and they also refuse to do anything differently, and they are dying. It reminds me of that sleeping pill commercial. I think it’s called Rozerem. Some of you have seen that commercial, the funny commercial with the beaver and Abraham Lincoln and somebody in an underwater suit. Someone, I read, has joked that the reason people have trouble sleeping is trying to figure out the commercial. I’m not sure that’s true, but anyway, the beaver is talking to the man, and he’s one of the characters in his dreams, and he says, “We’ve missed you. We’ve missed you.” He says, “Yes, I know. I haven’t been getting any sleep.” The beaver says, “Have you spoken to your doctor?” The man says, “No.” Then the beaver comments sarcastically, “So, you have a problem, and not doing a thing about it hasn’t helped! Weird!”

The young pastor’s church refuses to do anything differently, but none of the things that used to work, work anymore. They are dying because they refuse to change or try anything new even though we serve a God, who makes all things new. Weird!

God promises the power to change and grow, and Saul to Paul is just one dramatic story. Some of you know God’s power to change. Some of you have been examples. Some of us have been examples of God’s power to change, and some of you are afraid to ask for God’s power to change even though what you are doing is not working! You’ll keep doing it because it’s what you know. People and churches go with what we know even when it’s not working anymore.

The philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, relates a parable about a community of ducks at duck church. I had a dog emergency this morning because we have ducks that go through my front yard that’s off to the left of my front yard, and my dogs have wireless collars. I don’t know how it works. It’s magic. They stay in the back yard, but my dog somehow bites the collar off of my little dog, which goes and chases the ducks, and then looks guilty and says, “Buddy, took my collar off!” This morning I had to catch him and get him back and put his collar back on. I don’t know how they do that. It says on the instructions they can’t take off those collars, but Buddy can. Anyway, Kierkegaard said there is a community of ducks wandering off to duck church, and the duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had gifted ducks with wings, an unmistakable token of divinity. He said that with such wings, and the duck preacher began to reverberate, and the audience of the duck congregation started quacking with excitement because they knew where he was going. He said, “With such wings, there is nowhere we ducks cannot go. There is no God-given task we ducks cannot accomplish. Why with such wings, we ducks who believe can soar into the very presence of God!” So stirring was the duck preacher’s sermon that the congregation was now filled. The sanctuary was filled with the quacking of duck amens. At last, at the conclusion of the service, the ducks filed out toward their homes, politely congratulating the duck preacher on his wonderful message. The duck preacher received his congregation’s compliments with nods and smiles, then all of them, the preacher and the congregation waddled back home just as they had waddled to church that morning, not one of them using their wings.

We worship the living God. Is this really the best we can do? Rarely growing, rarely changing, rarely stepping out in faith and doing something different. Has the living God no power left to change us as He changed Saul to Paul? Are we doomed to a half-life? Some of us live a half-life – half faith, half doubt, half courage, half fear, stuck between the alpha and the omega until we die. God came here to this earth in Jesus Christ, Paul said. He says this is the truth. I am not lying. I am not making this up. Paul said that I met the risen Christ. I gave in. I gave up. I gave myself to God and left behind all that was important to me. The Gospel that Paul got and preached was not about law and not about doing and doing and trying. The good news that Paul got was grace, grace that infuses your soul and changes you. Grace that gives you freedom, freedom of forgiveness. Freedom, forgiveness complete and sure and eternal. He preached that what

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God did in Jesus Christ creates a new day so that we can soar free from guilt and leave it behind. Soar free to forgive others who are guilty of hurting us. Grace that opens wider our embrace and our idea about who is lovable. No one, no one is outside the love of Jesus Christ.

Remember who Saul was. He was defined by his past. His past defined him. Whom he knew and what he knew and where he came from defined him. Then he met Jesus. Saul had learned at the feet of the greatest rabbi of his day, and he was a Pharisee among Pharisees. He was born a Roman citizen. He had status. He had wealth. He had family and political-power connections. He had the power to go and arrest these people called Christians and bring them back for trial. He even was, if you remember, the one who held the coats at the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. He probably felt right and righteous and even godly as Stephen was stoned to death. Can you imagine the change, the literal repentance, which means turn around, that Saul made to become the Apostle Paul? I don’t think you can. I don’t think I can.

The facts of his life before and after give emotional and psychological proof of God’s power to change. Repentance means nothing more and nothing less than a turn around, a turn from your own way around and back to following God’s way. Before you think this is an old, old story about the way that God used to work, let me tell you, for myself, for Kathy Carr, for every retired pastor we have in this congregation, we, too, were called to preach by the risen Christ. God is calling each lay person to do something special that you alone are particularly equipped to do to build up the church, the body of Christ. To minister not to the world as a whole, but to the particular place and the people who are around you.

I was called, and I have been turning and turning toward God with many a mid-course correction for 25+ years. I know that God still calls, and God still grabs our attention, and sometimes spins us around, and says, “No, this way. If you follow me, this way.” God’s Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts and says the truth behind these dusty old words of Scripture is still living and real. God’s spirit still speaks and says that the desire to belong and to have meaning and truth and someone trustworthy in your life begins and ends with God. God’s spirit says turn around. It is not your next whim. It is not even your best family tradition. It is me says the living God. You were made for me. Turn around. I have things for you to do. I have a life and mind for you filled with things, which will fulfill you more than all the empty promises and chasing after wind that you have done for all these years.

Jesus made the heart and the personality of God known to us. No hatred for enemies. No justification for violence. No lying. No stealing. No coveting. No serving your next wandering desires. No, Jesus revealed a life filled with the meaning of knowing who you are. You are a child of God. A child of God, who lives and loves God even when it costs, and lives and loves others even when it costs, and it always costs! It always costs to love anyone! Even more costly is to spend your life serving self, and then perhaps die empty and alone, looking back on your life without meaning, without purpose, without

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God. What a sad, sad ending! Only Jesus claims to reveal to the incarnation of God. Only Jesus claims to have the power and the authority and the desire to forgive. Only Jesus teaches grace instead of legalistic working and striving and even killing in God’s name. No one but Christians claim that God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross.

Saul thought these claims were outrageous heresies, and he sought to stamp it out, but then his encounter with the risen Christ made him repent. He turned around. He turned his back on all his friends and money and power and tradition, and found what he thought he had already. He found a way to put God out front. Leading him with love instead of threats and laws and rituals and strict, strict working at being better than your neighbor with all these little rules, instead he found grace, free grace. The amazing grace is what Paul had been blinded to and now found for himself and for Christians and for Gentiles and for all those he formerly avoided and looked down on with contempt.

The Spirit still says, woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel. I was talking to an older pastor who said that some congregations would say to you, woe to you, preacher, if you do.

Main Street Church culture once was proud of leaders and moneyed bosses and fine minds and social contacts that we attracted, and none of those things are bad. God can use them. The Gospel can be spread through them. If Main Street is nothing more than a self-centered society singing badly, praying sadly, and enduring sermons from an inoffensive, boring preacher, if we are nothing more than that, then who will miss us when we’re gone. Would God’s Gospel be heard if we closed our doors tomorrow if that is all we are? Maybe we should plan and act in a different vein. Maybe we should ask ourselves how does this further the cause of Jesus Christ? How does this activity continue what God began in Jesus Christ? How does it change lives as Saul was changed to Paul? If it does not do any of these things, then why are we doing it?

I want to journey with those who want to journey with God, along the way refreshed and moved by His spirit, and finally ending in God’s eternal embrace. I want us to live as changed people called out of the world, out of the world’s standards to give Christ light and hope to those around us. If you have some other idea about what this church is for I am sorry, you’ve gotten the wrong impression about what we do here.

Bishop Willimon reminds us. Authenticity is more than a matter of being who I am. It is a matter of being who God calls me to be. For preachers and church members, authenticity means being true, not just to our feelings, but true to our vocation, true to God’s call, true to the name, ‘child of God’. This is God’s truth as it has been revealed to me. I am not making this up, as Paul said. Amen.