

“It Wasn’t His Idea”  
Acts 9:1-19a; Galatians 1:11-17  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

January 22, 2023  
Westminster, Greenville  
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The late writer David Foster Wallace once wrote a short story in which the narrator is reflecting on his childhood. In particular, he remembers A FAVORITE TOY he used to have.

When he was 5 years old, the man’s parents gave him a toy cement truck for Christmas. It was made of solid wood, except for two steel rods that served as axles.

The boy pulled the truck around on a string.  
He played with the cement mixer more than any other toy.

And he did this because his parents told him that it was “magic.” The magic worked like this: Whenever the boy pulled the truck, the drum on the back—the portion responsible for mixing the cement—would rotate. The magic was that the drum only rotated when the boy was not looking.

Upon hearing this, the boy is thrilled. And he begins to devise experiments to catch sight of the rotating drum:

He tries whirling around really fast to see if he can see it moving.  
He takes sidelong peeks in the mirror as he walks past the mirror.

He asks his parents to pull the cement truck across the living room  
while he “secretly” watches in another room  
through a keyhole.

Nothing works, of course.  
He never catches the drum spinning.

And the boy's father is proud.

His son's research has uncovered an important reality: there is no magic in the world.

But curiously, that turns out to be the EXACT OPPOSITE of what the boy learned from his toy.

“As an adult,” the narrator observes, “[I came to realize] that the reason I spent so much time trying to ‘catch’ the drum rotating was that I wanted to verify that I could not.”

The boy's failure to catch the drum in its rotation does not become a source of sadness...it becomes a source of joy. Because the boy concluded from his experiments NOT that he was being fooled by his parents, but that there are some things in life that you simply cannot “see.”

Looking back on that toy as an adult, the narrator realizes that it left a lasting impression on him. It opened a space within him—a space for the parts of life we cannot see...a space for reverence, for mystery, for the inexplicable.

This is how he describes it:

“The fact that the most powerful and significant connections in our lives are (at the time) invisible to us seems to me a compelling argument for religious reverence.”<sup>1</sup>

**The most powerful and significant connections in our lives are invisible to us...**

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, “All That,” *The New Yorker*, December 6, 2009. I am indebted to a Mid-Winter Lecture in 2021 at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary by Dr. Scott Black Johnston for first calling my attention to this story.

I think the Apostle Paul just might have agreed with the narrator in David Foster Wallace's story.

In our two texts for today, we hear two different accounts of Paul's conversion experience:

One comes from Paul's own hand, in his letter to the Galatians.

Do you remember what Paul writes?

"...when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me..."

Paul's talking here about the most important moment in his life. He's talking about the revelation that changed his life.

And what's fascinating is that Paul himself does not describe it with ANY detail.

He simply says that it came from God—it was all God's doing—and that God had set Paul apart for his life's work *before Paul was born...*

The powerful and significant connections in our lives are invisible to us...

In other words, Paul's life—and the direction it took—it was not his idea.

It was God's idea.

It was divine revelation, an experience of mystery and wonder—that set Paul's life on its ultimate course.

Have you ever thought about your life that way?

Have you ever asked yourself:  
how much of my life has been MY idea...  
and how much has been God's idea?

How much of my life originated in the heart and mind of God?

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One of my mentors in ministry tells the story of his first time ever preaching a sermon to a congregation.

Most pastors I know remember the first time we preached a sermon...not to a class in seminary, but on a Sunday morning in worship. There's nothing quite like standing up and preaching a sermon for the very first time.

I have a vivid memory of my first time out of the gates...  
I remember being extraordinarily nervous.  
I remember it took place during an internship at a church in Denver, Colorado, and my parents and sister and brother flew in from Michigan to Colorado to hear me preach.

Not that there was any pressure or anything...

Anyway, when one of my mentors recalled his first-time preaching, it wasn't his entire family who showed up.

He only invited his grandmother.  
She was, in his recollection, "the most significant spiritual mentor" of his life.

He writes:

My grandmother was deeply faithful and spiritual throughout the hardships that came her way in her 80+ years.

***She was also fun and irreverent.***

She loved to cheat at card games  
and then laugh heartily when she exposed her own ruse.

**In other words, she knew how to enjoy life.**

**And she knew to whom she owed her life.**

As my colleague puts it:

*The night before my first sermon,  
we went to dinner and she asked me how I was feeling.*

*I told her I was apprehensive and so unsure...*

*To which she let loose that hearty laugh and said to me:*

***“...well, it’s awfully good then, isn’t it,  
that none of what happens tomorrow  
is up to you...”<sup>2</sup>***

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**The most powerful and significant connections in our lives are invisible to us...**

Do you see what we’re talking about this morning?

Paul’s experience on that Damascus Road wasn’t his doing.

It was God’s.

All of which raises a provocative question for us:

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<sup>2</sup> As told by Mark Ramsey in his sermon, “Look Here,” preached at First Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA, August 22, 2021.

How much of our lives is God responsible for?  
 Are we even able to step back and say, “I did this, but God did that...”??

I don't believe God is pulling EVERY string, causing all events to happen. You know that.

An unexpected diagnosis,  
 a marriage that falls apart,  
 a child who suffers from mental illness,  
 a season of grief that doesn't seem to end...

These kind of hardships are NOT the handiwork of God.

At the same time, I do believe that the God we hear about in Scripture is actively involved in our lives, that God works in ways that are too mysterious to explain.

Just ask Ananias.

In the ninth chapter of Acts, it's not only Paul who is startled and surprised by his experience of the Divine.

Ananias is dumbfounded as well.

When God says: Go lay your hands on Saul...  
 do you remember how Ananias responds?

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem...”

But God said to Ananias:

“Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen...”

Do you believe that Ananias is unique in this regard?  
 Or do you think that God loves to SURPRISE US TOO?  
 To catch us off guard?  
 To delight us with joy?  
 To carry us through trials we never dreamed we could make it  
 through?

To call us to tasks we didn't know we were meant to do?

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Are any of you familiar with the author John Green?

He wrote that best-selling book *The Fault in Our Stars* about a decade or so ago...even as a YA novel, it became one of the bestselling books of all time.

What's more fascinating to me than the story he invented in that book, however, is a story that he lived before he began writing books.

After college, John Green intended to go to seminary and become an Episcopal priest. So he spent some time serving as a hospital chaplain. One day during his chaplaincy, a 3-year-old boy came into the Emergency Room.

He had been out in the yard, playing.  
 His father had been burning leaves.  
 The fire got a little out of control.  
 And this young boy suffered terrible burns.

One of the doctors on the scene told the chaplain rookie, John Green, that this kid was going to die.

It was an experience that altered John Green's faith.

He felt like he could no longer go to seminary.  
He no longer believed he had the kind of faith that would be  
required for a priest.

So his life took another route.

He wrote books.  
And he became popular on YouTube.  
And he made a lot of money.  
And he suffered from his own personal battles with anxiety...

But he never forgot about that boy.

You see, when John Green was still a chaplain and went to the  
hospital the day after that boy had come in—the boy was no longer  
there.

And John Green assumed the doctor was right.  
Or almost assumed.

He could not bring himself to ask anyone.  
He could not bring himself to confirm what the doctor said.

So what he decided to do was pray.  
For 20 years, John Green prayed for this boy, whose name was  
Nick.

And he prayed for his family.

Even after he got married, John Green would pray for his own  
children, but sometimes he might forget to pray for his children—and  
yet, he says he never forgot to pray for Nick.



More than once, he would type Nick's name in Google—but he never hit “Enter” on his keyboard, he never could bring himself to actually conduct a search that would tell him what happened to Nick.

Finally, some two decades after that day in the hospital, John Green decided to go through with his Google search...and within 30 seconds, he discovered the truth:

Nick had NOT died, all those years ago.  
John Green found him on Facebook.  
Nick was now in his early 20s.

And during the pandemic, John Green reached out to Nick...they met over Zoom. And he learned a lot of things about Nick. He learned that Nick was doing well. He learned that he was in graduate school. He learned that Nick had been wearing boots during that fire, boots that kept Nick from losing his legs and, perhaps, his life.

He also learned that the experience of their son being burned had sent Nick's parents back to church. And that they raised Nick in the Christian faith as well.

John asked Nick how he could have such faith, after what happened to him...after all, just watching what had happened had caused a nearly mortal wound in John Green's own faith.

And Nick said he had wrestled with it for a long time.

John asked him if it was ok if he kept praying for him.

Nick said it was—and then he suggested something that John Green had never thought of before.

He wondered if perhaps, by praying for him every single day for all those years, if perhaps those prayers had had just as much effect on John as they may have had on Nick.

Nick suggested that by praying for him and his family, John had kept the conversation going with God, even when John's faith was hanging by a thread.

Nick suggested that God's handiwork was behind those prayers.<sup>3</sup>  
In other words...can I put it like this?

Maybe John Green's prayers weren't just his idea.  
Maybe they were God's idea, and God had been at work in John Green's life for those 20 years in a way he never dreamed...

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**The most powerful and significant connections in our lives are invisible to us...**

In the church, we have a name for that power, that significant and invisible connection.

We call it grace.  
The grace of the living God.

And there's no way to understand Paul's experience on that road to Damascus without using that word. But there's also no way to understand our lives without using that word.

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<sup>3</sup> As told on the podcast Heavyweight, [#37 John | Heavyweight \(gimletmedia.com\)](#). Some information was supplemented by the Wikipedia article on John Green, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Green](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Green).

According to the late writer Frederick Buechner, “The grace of God means something like this: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party would [never] have been complete without you.”<sup>4</sup>

What if the Church’s job is to find people who need to hear those words:

**The party would never have been complete without you.**

In a society that loves to shame and divide and defeat other people, what if the Church’s job is to say:

**“The party would never have been complete without you.”**

Can you say it with me now?

Practice it, here in church?

I know...just humor me.

One, two, three:

**The party would never have been complete without you.**

That’s not bad, but try it one more time:

**The party would never have been complete without you.**

Good. Now...see what happens when you say it every day.

Find someone who needs to hear it, and say it in such a way that there can be no doubt in that person’s mind.

Find a way to say it this week—to the person you love the most.  
And find a way to say it the person you love the least.

**The party would never have been complete without you.**

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

You can say it with words.  
You can say it without words.  
You can let your actions speak for you.

Just remember...anytime you remind someone how important they are for God's party, any time you extend the grace of God to someone else, just remember...that grace was NEVER your idea.

And it certainly wasn't MY idea.

You know whose idea it was....

(Amen.)