

## *Sometimes God Has Other Plans*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, (6June), 2010.*

At the baptism of George Edward Chapman Macdonnell.

Text: Galatians 1:13,15

“I persecuted the church to an extreme degree...but when God, who from my mother’s womb had set me apart and called me by his grace...” ~St. Paul

Paul is the greatest example of my title, “*Sometimes God Has Other Plans.*” He was a great tormenter of Christians and churches until he was knocked down by a blazing vision and call from Jesus on the road to Damascus. He heard the voice asking why Paul was persecuting Jesus.<sup>1</sup> In only a moment his life and mission turned from being an enemy of Jesus to being his foremost apostle to the Gentiles and the one genius who was responsible for establishing the gospel and discipleship in the Mediterranean world. Without him, we would probably not be sitting here this morning. Who knows where we would be?

In reading over the text from Galatians this week, I found myself puzzling about the communion table this morning. Who among us comes expecting an encounter so direct as that of St. Paul’s? It is all in the pronouns. By that I mean, in Paul’s case, “Saul, Saul why are *you* persecuting *me*?” At the Table, “This is *my* body, broken for *you*.” I don’t think it is so clear when we serve the supper in the pews, but when you come forward to the table, Cindy or I say as we serve you, “John, this is the body of Christ, for *you*” or “Mary, this is the cup of salvation, for *you*.” To be served communion by a minister who knows your name, who knows your strengths and weaknesses, who probably baptized your child or buried your spouse, well, that brings the gospel down to our level. “*My* body, for *you*.” It is, as I said, all in the pronouns.

I wonder if any of us come today to the table expecting an encounter with not only the minister who knows us but with the Lord Jesus who does, too? Mark Noll, a church historian at Notre Dame University and a Presbyterian, wrote a poem about the suburban members of his church coming to the communion table. See if you don’t find yourself mentioned in his litany...

The pious cruel, the petty gossipers  
and callous climbers on the make, the wives  
with icy tongues and husbands with their hearts

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 9:1-9.

of stone, the ones who battle drink and do not always win, the power lawyers mute before this awful bar of mercy, boys uncertain of themselves and girls not sure of where they fit, the poor and rich hemmed in alike by cash, physicians waiting to be healed, two women side by side—the one with unrequited longing for a child, the other terrified by signs within of life, the saintly weary weary in pursuit of good, the academics (soft and cosseted) who posture over words, the travelers coming home from chasing wealth or power or wantonness, the mothers choked by dual duties, parents nearly crushed by children died or lost, and some with cancer-ridden bodies, some with spikes of pain in chest or back or knee or mind or heart. They come, O Christ, they come to you.<sup>2</sup>

We hear the promise: ‘*my* body broken, for *you*.’ We think both of his brokenness and our own. When we make that connection between him and us—for you, for me, for us—something can happen, does happen.

We do not always expect it—after all we are thinking of the trip next week or the one we have just returned from last week. We are thinking about the many distractions in business and family life, not so much of God. In many cases, after all, our spouses just told us, “Get dressed we’re going to church.” But, sometimes God has other plans for us. Paul said his call was decided from his mother’s womb, that is, when he was younger than Teddy whom I baptized this morning. Yes, we have plans, but God does, too. When we hear those words, ‘for me, for you, for us,’ it ought to trigger some new hope in us. These ‘humble bits [of bread] that [show] how God almighty ... decided to embrace humanity, and why these clean, well-fed, well-dressed suburbanites might need his grace.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Noll, Mark. *Scots’ Form in the Suburbs*. The Christian Century, June 1, 2010, vol. 12, no. 11, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*