

When Saul began his career as a preacher he had one large obstacle to overcome. You remember his story. Stephen had been chosen as a deacon because of his character and faith. But Saul partnered with those who objected to the followers of Christ. As they picked up rocks to throw at Stephen, they took off their cloaks and piled them up at the feet of Saul. He protected their garments while they stoned Stephen to death. Then St. Luke says, "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." Saul breathed threats and murder, and asked the high priest for permission to capture any Christian in Damascus, tie them up, and bring them to Jerusalem. But on the road a bright light blinded him and a voice called out, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Then he asked one of the most important questions in the Bible: "Who are you?" He spent several days learning who Jesus was. He regained his sight, received baptism, and started preaching in Damascus. He preached so well that his former allies now decided to put him to death. They surrounded the city, watching for him to leave through the gates. So at night the Christians stuffed Saul into a basket, lowered him down the outside of the city wall, and helped him flee to Jerusalem. There he began his career as a preacher.

Now, at this point he had a large obstacle to overcome. Here's how today's first reading begins: "When Saul had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple." Who could blame them? A hit man comes into your parlor and says, "Well, here I am. I've changed my mind." You'd be a fool to give him a slice of pizza. But Barnabas vouched for Saul, and when the Christians learned that their enemies were now Saul's enemies too, they helped him escape again. All the while, the church continued to grow.

The obstacle Saul faced was distrust. We talk a lot about conversion, but when it happens, we don't trust it. When someone wants to change we don't always let them because we'll have to change the way we treat them. In recent years the Hickman Mills Ministry Alliance has been building trust among our churches. Its leaders meet monthly; we sponsor the Thanksgiving service and a lent ecumenical service; we keep an eye on issues in the Hickman Mills School District; we support the work of the Community Assistance Council for the needy of this community; and we're working on ways of evangelizing together--since we all believe in Christ we think our congregations should reach out together in a non-competitive way to those who don't have a church in this community. If we want someone else to commit to Christ, we have to commit to Christ. If we want people to change and join our community, we may have to change so that they feel more welcome. Like the first disciples who found Saul in their parlor one day, we may be surprised that someone else's conversion also challenges us to grow.