

Let's call her Josie. Her boyfriend Alex cheats on her. She puts up with it because he makes her feel needed. Now the stories are too many. She tells him they have to break up. He tells her, "We don't have to break up. I've changed. She wants to believe him, but she can't be sure if he really is different.

Human beings do not easily change. Each new year we make resolutions, each Lent we do penance, each confession we resolve to sin no more. Sometimes we really do change. Sometimes we say we'll do it and never do.

What can help us change is support from other people. For example, it's easier to lose weight when people say you're skinnier. It's easier to take out the trash when you love the people who made the mess. Josie will be able to help Alex. Taking him back will help him if he has changed; turning him away will help him if he has not. The key question is this: Is he different, or has he just said he's different?

This dilemma confronts the early church in today's first reading; it's a little-known chapter in the life of St. Paul. Most people know the basic story: Saul was a tent-maker from Tarsus. He studied religion under Gamaliel and became a zealous Jew. When some Jews professed that Jesus was the Messiah, Saul joined those who persecuted the new movement. In fact, he watched the stoning of our first martyr, Stephen the deacon. One day Saul was on his way to Damascus with orders to continue the persecution. A blinding light threw him to the ground, and a voice bellowed from the heavens, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul, completely blind, entered the home of Ananias, who healed his eyes and gave him the eyes of Christian faith. After this conversion, Saul changed his name to Paul and began to preach the Christian Gospel.

That story is pretty familiar. What is less known is the next chapter. Paul started preaching the Gospel in Damascus. Now the tables were reversed. The Christians couldn't believe he was sincere and the Jews decided to kill him at the city gates. Paul's friends concealed him in a basket and lowered him over the city walls at night. He escaped to Jerusalem, walked in on a group of Christians and said, "Here I am. I've changed." So here's their dilemma: Do they believe him or not? Is he different or has he just said he's different?

Other people exert tremendous influence on us when we say we've changed. They have the power to confirm or undo us.

The Christians decided to accept Paul, but not on his own word. Only because of Barnabas. Barnabas told them of Paul's vision on the road, and of how well he preached in Damascus. Then, because they believed Barnabas, they believed Paul.

When people tell us they've changed, they look to us for support. If it's doubtful they've changed we may turn them away. That may help them try again. But if they have and if others speak on their behalf, giving them another try may help the conversion stick.