

## **Conversion Experiences**

3 Easter 2019; Acts 9:1-20; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19; Psalm 30

I want to commend our Psalm today as a marvelous summary of why and how we worship. But my homily will begin with our reading from the book of Acts. Acts is Luke's sequel to the Gospel of Luke, probably written 40 or 50 years after Jesus' death. The Book of Acts covers the time from Jesus' Ascension to Paul's imprisonment in Rome, and includes the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, Peter's initial preaching in Jerusalem, Paul's conversion and the beginning of the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Today's reading from Acts 9 describes Paul's conversion experience, which has always fascinated me, probably because I've never had a conversion experience, and used to worry about it. In fact, in the mid 1950's, this concerned enough that at a Billy Graham event in Seattle when I was in high school, I actually got out of my seat and went forward when Billy, in his dulcet but urgent tones, invited all who wanted to accept Christ to come forward. We were ushered to a back room where folks were available to engage us in one-on-one conversations. But when I said I was there out of curiosity, this person moved on to a more promising candidate. I rejoined my friends, probably with a sigh of relief, although I do think curiosity about Jesus is about as good an opening to a conversation as one could want.

The first conversion described in Acts is found in chapter 8, where the Apostle Philip joined an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official, in his chariot. The court official was reading the prophet Isaiah and asked about the meaning of the passage "like a sheep he was led to the slaughter." When Phillip explained the passage, the Ethiopian stopped the chariot near water and asked to be baptized.

Paul's conversion experience was much more dramatic, with Paul falling to the ground after a heavenly flash of light and hearing Jesus call out and speak to him. The Greek word translated "conversion" means turning around. Paul's conversion was certainly a dramatic reversal of course. He had earned a reputation for making trouble for the incipient Christian groups, and had been complicit in the stoning of Stephan.

In the church today Paul is out of fashion. In fact I've had church people tell me

they “hate” Paul. But I would suggest, it is difficult to exaggerate Paul’s importance in the history of the Church. Paul founded many individual faith communities, and faith communities became the bedrock of the church. As I’ve said before, Christianity is not an individual sport; it is something we live in community. Paul’s life and teaching shaped Christianity in that direction. And, fortunately, Paul wrote numerous letters to the churches that were preserved. And give us insight into his thinking.

Part of Paul’s problem is his reference, in one of his letters, to women keeping silent in church. But haven’t we all thought about the desirability of more silence in church? I’m thinking, for example, of the about chatter in the pews before the service, which only seems to get louder when the formal service begins with the preludes. How do you feel when you see folks sitting in quiet contemplation or kneeling in prayer while surrounded by people talking? And then there is the social chatter during the exchange of the peace.

Paul is clear in his letters about the important role played by women in the founding of new church communities including hosting them in their homes. Paul in his letters called out at least two women “apostles,” the highest accolade Paul could give. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, male translators changed the name of Junia, one woman Paul calls an apostle, to Junius, the masculine form of that name.

This was not acknowledged in our English translations of the NT until a footnote was added in the New Revised Standard version of the New Bible, the translation we currently use.

Paul’s letters ground Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, and the emerging church, in the Hebrew Testament and its theology. And he sets an egalitarian standard: Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one “Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or ‘Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one spirit.”

Finally, I would note, that each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we quote language first set forth in Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, written before any of the Gospels, when he instructed the Corinthian church on how to celebrate the Eucharist: “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the

Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' ”

Our gospel reading from John is the account of Jesus' post-resurrection fishing advice for the five disciples at the Sea of Galilee. When Diane and I traveled to Palestine we visited the location tradition says Jesus cooked the fish breakfast. Like many of the locations of Jesus' healings and other miracles, the exact location is not known, and more than one site is claimed to be true location. But this one struck me as a likely spot, near the village of Cana where Simon Peter's mother lived and where Jesus is recorded as having spent time. It wasn't difficult to imagine that setting as the location of Jesus' fish breakfast. When the disciples returned to shore, they discovered Jesus already preparing fish for their breakfast.

In the context of the Gospel of John, Jesus' breakfast can be seen as a Eucharistic meal. Jesus prepares for his disciples, a meal that concludes with Jesus asking Simon Peter three times whether Peter loves him, questions that echo Peter's three denials, just before the Crucifixion. Jesus' responses to Peter's affirmations of his love for the Lord, feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep can be understood as Jesus' forgiveness of Peter's three fold denial of Jesus.

The passage concludes with a statement with which I can increasingly identify: “when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. ... After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

I was blessed to be raised in a church going family, first attending church at the age of 2 weeks. Over 77 years my understanding of the Christian faith has evolved. I no longer worry about never having had a conversion experience. Being baptized at six weeks of age, confirmed my membership in the church, and in the years since, I hope I've grown in my understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Amen

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