

Conversion of St. Paul                      1/25/2009                      Cycle B    K. Emge

Psalm 67            Acts 26:9-21            Galatians 1:11-24            Mathew 10:16-22

The readings today speak of the most famous conversion of early Christians' greatest advocate for all people, the church's greatest source for theology, Saul of Tarsus. If Saul had remained an unbeliever in the risen Lord we would be missing 13 of the 27 books of the new testament canon and Christianities early major expansion to the Gentiles.

A number of years ago there was a survey of academics from a number of disciplines to compile a list of people with the greatest influence on Western civilization. Who was number one? No, it wasn't Jesus. Actually #1 was Alexander the Great because it was he who spread the Hellenistic culture throughout the known world. This has had so much influence on our natural and metaphysical thought processes. In this survey Paul tied Jesus for 5<sup>th</sup> place. The point is not that Jesus came in tied for 5<sup>th</sup> because this could be argued most likely successfully. No the point is that in the eyes of the academic community in this survey Paul was so important to the spread and eventual success of the early Christian Church. With his dedicated evangelism of gentiles this small sect within the Judaism of Jesus became instead the major world religion about Jesus.

But Saul starts out as a violent opponent of early Christians. In his own words in Acts he states, "I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus. I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities." Why was he so violently opposed? Saul was a devoted pharisaic Jew, a strict legalist sect.

They were the most numerous and influential Jewish sect of Jesus day. They stood for rigid observance of the letter and form of the laws and traditions. Early Christians, on the other hand, maintained that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah who died for the sins of the world. After about 2000 years of reinforcement this seems perfectly reasonable to us but to Jews of Jesus day this was preposterous!

Many Jews did not anticipate a Messiah but those who did thought the messiah would be a warrior who would drive out the Roman occupiers. Others saw the messiah as a heavenly being or a great human priest. No one expected that the messiah would be a crucified criminal. To call this peasant from a small back water town the messiah was understandably blasphemous to Saul.

Next in Acts Paul describes his life changing event. "There on the road to Damascus with the authority and commission of the Chief Priest at high noon with a bright sun he saw a light from heaven, brighter than any sun. He hears the Lord Jesus - Saul, why are you persecuting me? Not just my people but ME, Jesus. He didn't call upon Paul to simply stop the persecutions and go. No, He tells Paul, "It is useless for you to fight against my will, my call to you. I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to appoint you as my servant and witness. You are to tell the world what you have seen and what I will show you in the future." This is the great part for us – "I am sending you to the gentiles to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of satan to God.

Why Paul? Paul had numerous gifts to share. He was intelligent, learned, able to use the art of rhetoric and speak, read and probably write Greek. But most of all Paul was passionate when it came to doing things. When called to service in the Lord he becomes a tireless worker in the

vineyard, unafraid of the dangers of his task. As we are called today to use our special gifts and talents, Paul was called to share his gifts and talents.

Paul was skilled at reason and rhetoric. He no longer saw Jesus as one who was cursed by God in his crucifixion but one who fulfilled God's own purpose. He reasoned that Jesus' death must have a divine purpose. It brought about a right relationship with God. Paul came to believe that following the law could not put a person in right standing before God. Only Christ's death on the cross could do that. This is what it meant for Paul's conversion to a follower of Christ, to personally meet the living Jesus and begin a relationship with him. Not to get religion. Paul already had religion. He replaced it with a relationship with Christ. He didn't embrace a philosophy, he met a living person.

He was also not afraid to admit his error and sin against the early church. His history and conversion are told no less than three times.

There are two components to this story. The first is the conversion of heart. The second is his call to service. Have we had a conversion experience of our own? Maybe it is not a blinding light as we travel the road to Damascus or in my case down I-80 to the malls in Coralville or Des Moines. (I have two teenage daughters) But are we not all called for a conversion of our hearts, a daily conversion to service not of ourselves but of service to others. Our stories of conversion of our hearts and stories of acceptance of service to God based on that conversion take as many forms as there are individuals. For slow learners like me we may have many stories throughout our lives.

God doesn't promise that even after the conversion of our hearts and accepting the call to service that it will always be easy. In the Gospel of Matthew today we see Jesus advising the apostles on their ministries before sending them out. He warns them to beware, to be as shrewd as snakes and as harmless as doves. But we may be ridiculed. In this age, in this country when we witness or share about our Lord we have little chance of being called before the Grinnell City Council and flogged for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. But we may indeed be ridiculed or ignored. As situations arise to help others we may say nothing, use secular platitudes or do we allow the spirit of the Lord to speak. We needn't worry about what to say but to be open to the spirit of God in our everyday dealings in life.

This conversion and call to service is not just about this service aspect. The psalm today, Psalm 67, is titled Nations called to praise God. A song to be accompanied by stringed instruments. Unless William wants to go back to Juilliard and get yet another degree, this time in stringed instruments, in our case this song of praise will be with the accompaniment of the pipe organ. The psalm asks God to mark us with grace and blessing. Yes, we accept your call of conversion and service. Let people thank and enjoy you. Let all far flung people become happy because you judge them fairly. You tend to the far flung peoples. Thus this is not just the God of the Jews alone from the Hebrew scriptures, but the God of all people. The Good News of Jesus Christ. And thanks to Paul's conversion and acceptance of God's call among the gentiles we are living with the fruits of his labor. Because of his hessed dedication to the people of God this small radical sect of a small but ancient religion became the dominant world religions for all the nations of the world.

We are also called to share with others the good news of God's powerful deliverance and his plan of salvation for all. This should not be thought of as a chore to avoid or to fulfill grudgingly. It should be a natural expression of our joy at being delivered from forces too powerful for us to handle alone. With His help we can live with freedom and joy, no matter what our circumstances. Like Paul, let us accept God's call of conversion of our hearts and call to serve him. Let us celebrate and spread the Good News of God's powerful delivery.