

Homily May 1, 2022.

Pr. Lucy

Texts: Acts 9: 1-20; Psalm 30; John 21: 1-19

Some of you know me; some of you don't. I'm a member here at Peace, but I've been absent quite a bit lately because I've been Supply Preaching at various congregations around the Bay Area--which means that almost every Sunday I'm in a different place, and things are placed differently, things are done differently, things are located differently, and things that are supposed to be where they're supposed to be, aren't....So, bear with me, we'll all make it through.

Conversion isn't a word we usually associate with Easter, but today's story from Acts demonstrates the conversion effect of the Resurrection, a blessedly disruptive power that we may not always want to embrace.

Conversion also isn't a word we tend to associate with ourselves, we usually reserve it for somebody else, for people we think really need God's life-changing intervention. We already know the Lord. But if we're thinking that conversion is just a prescription for somebody else, we're very wrong. Webster's Dictionary defines conversion as the experience of being brought over from one belief or allegiance to another. There's more to it than that for Christians, but we'll get to that later. If we stick with Webster's definition for now, it tells us that conversion is not a do-it-yourself activity. It requires the intervention of someone or something outside oneself, either because we don't have the power to change, or because we don't have the will to change, or because we just don't see the need to change.

As disciples of Jesus, it is easy to see why Saul needed conversion. The writer of Acts tells us he was relentless, aggressive, even violent in his zeal to round up the followers of Jesus, and march them away to Jerusalem to be judged and punished. Luke even tells us Saul looked on approvingly while the Deacon Stephen was stoned to death, becoming the first martyr. So, who could argue that Saul needed to be converted, and the sooner the better.

It's a lot harder to see why Ananias needed to be converted. but he, it Conversion you see is always an equal opportunity activity for God. It's not reserved simply for those who sin seem particularly horrendous and frightening conversion is God's gracious gift to all even those who call themselves disciples even those who are leaders in the church like Ananias. Still including Ananias on the list of candidates for conversion is hard to accept. In fact, it makes us uncomfortable because it suggests that Ananias' story could be ours. Now, we know Ananias was already a follower of Jesus and a leader in the church at Damascus, a man who regularly instructed others in the faith. So, what's not to like about Ananias? God must have thought well of him, since God, specifically, asked him to lay hands on Saul to restore his sight.

But Ananias suffered from his own blindness, which is why he didn't immediately say 'Yes' to the Lord. Instead, he said, *'Now, let's stop and think about this for a minute. Do you know who*

this guy Saul is and what he's been doing to your friends and mine?' Ananias tried to get God to call off what he perceived as a dangerous and misguided mission. Why? Well certainly because Ananias was afraid for himself and his community. When he thought about Saul, he could see only the Saul he feared, not the new Saul that God was summoning into existence. Ananias worried that Saul's conversion wouldn't stick, that the leopard couldn't change his spots, even with the help of God. Maybe he also thought that Saul didn't deserve this grace, this fresh start, this special commission. Indeed, perhaps deep inside a little voice was whispering, 'Am I not a more deserving candidate--a more suitable instrument to do great things for the Lord?'

But God would not be dissuaded. God said, 'Ananias, I know exactly what I'm doing, and exactly what I'm asking you to do. I have chosen to intervene in Saul's life, and I delight to give him what he never, ever imagined--a new purpose, a new ministry, a new life, just as I did for you. And by the way, Ananias, I want to convert you, too, from fear and anxiety, from jealousy and pride, from your misguided attempt to keep Saul from ministry, from your attempt to subvert my purpose and will. I want to give you a heart large enough to join me in rejoicing that today Saul is converted from hating Jesus to serving Jesus, from striking out at disciples to making more disciples.'

And as the writer of Acts reports, God's work is as fruitful with Ananias as with Saul. Ananias does go to Saul. He greets him as brother. He lays hands on him for healing, and he baptizes him. But wait, there is even more conversion to be seen. Saul is welcomed into the homes of the very people he once set out to destroy. A whole community is converted from fear, mistrust, and judgment. Now, suddenly it is not just Saul, but the whole church at Damascus which receives their sight and marvels at the power of Jesus' death and resurrection, how God changes the world one person at a time, how it overcomes what seems insurmountable, how it makes loving siblings of the worst enemies.

But of course, this isn't just Saul's story or Ananias's story or the church at Damascus story. This is my story, and your story, our whole community's story in which our own assumptions, blindness, fears, and judgment stand exposed. Our own attempts to play God laid bare. But also revealed is the good news that God will never be dissuaded from seeking us out to convert us.

God always sees more in us than we can or dare to. Indeed, as my colleague, Nadia Bulls Weber, says, *'Sometimes the fact that there is nothing about you that makes you the right person to do something is exactly what God is looking for.'* Over, and over, and over again we can count on God to convert us, to restore us to God and one another, to teach us how to pray for even those we're afraid to meet, unwilling to forgive, and loath to love--because conversion is not a one-time phenomenon. It is, as we say in the Baptismal liturgy daily, death and Resurrection, calling us anew to faithfulness and love. So, although like Ananias we may think we've already experienced conversion today, the Spirit is telling us that we are continually being called to conversion, to renewed allegiance to Jesus, to renewed dedication to the way of love.

You may have been surprised by today's bulletin cover, which features a cartoon instead of a photo of creation's beauty, or a painting by a great artist. I chose it in a spirit of what used to be called the 'Easter joke'. The old tradition in the German church was that on Easter Sunday, the pastor would begin their sermon by telling a joke. It wasn't because pastors are natural stand-up comedians--some shouldn't even try. Rather, it was to demonstrate that death's claims on us are now to be laughed at because Christ's Resurrection has shown them to be groundless, and idle boast. Today's cartoon builds on the principle of metamorphosis, the emergence of a beautiful butterfly from the lowly caterpillar. For the caterpillar, it's a once-in-a-lifetime thing. But for us, it's a daily and lifelong experience, enabling the full human being we were created to be to emerge.

Of course, some days are more difficult than others to accept the call to lifelong conversion. Perhaps, like me, you've been finding it extremely difficult to practice the way of love, when confronted daily with Putin's cruel aggression in Ukraine, or the attacks on our trans siblings in this country, or the anti-Semitic acts right here in Danville on *Yom Hashoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Such cruelties can make Christ's call to love seem too much to ask. But it's exactly at such times that we need another Resurrection conversion, a resurrection of the heart to remind us again how God so loves the world, and to rededicate ourselves to the things that make for peace. And we're not without help. The spirit of Jesus has promised to help us.

A little chant from the Iona Community in Scotland says this in a particularly beautiful way. *Take me, take me as I am*, it begins, reminding us that God begins with us as we are where we are, not when we have proven or improved ourselves. *Summon out what I shall be*, the chant goes on. Daily and continually God, forms and reforms us into the people God sees in us, the people God needs us to be for the ministry God has given us to do. *Set your seal upon my heart and live in me* that chant ends, sealed with the Cross of Christ. We trust that the spirit of Christ now lives in us, and fills the world with our words and deeds of forgiveness, peace, and healing. So today let us not refuse or resist God's gift of conversion. Let us instead welcome it, remembering how we too have been Saul, and then Paul. Let us go forth as Ananias to the world, fulfilling God's purpose.

God grant this today for Jesus' sake.
Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and Minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.