

“Conversion”
 Acts 7:51-8:9; John 3:1-10
 Rev. David Hutchinson
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Can you remember a time when you were NOT a follower of Jesus?

By that I mean - - a time you were not even TRYING to follow, more or less.

Not a time when you failed, but a time when you didn't try - - at all.

A time when you did not even identify as a follower.

A time when you were not - - more or less - - a Christian...?

So this is not a question about your behavior - - but your identity.

If you can NOT remember such a time - - then for the sake of entering into the texts today - - and this sermon - - can you IMAGINE being in such a place...? / Whoever you are - - imagine that you are someone ELSE than a Christian - - or a follower of Jesus.

So what would it take - - to get you to change?

When people change from one religion to another we call it “conversion”.

And most of the book of Acts is about - - conversion.

It is the book of the acts of *the apostles*.

It follows the gospels - - and picks up after Jesus dies.

And the acts of the apostles - - those left here by Jesus - - are inspired by the Holy Spirit.

And what they do - - mostly - - is participate in the conversion - - of people they meet.

People who had been Jewish - - first.

People who had worshipped in the synagogue.

And then - - Hellenistic Jews who were influenced by Greek culture.

And then - - eventually - - people from outside the Hebrew culture - - Gentiles.

The New Testament is the story of the community of believers doing this...

[stretch out arms - - wider and wider]

The community of believers - - grows.

It starts from INSIDE - - and is a Jewish movement - - first.

And then - - it grows - - as even people from outside Judaism are - - converted.

It grows as people - - change.

SO what do you think - - it takes - - to get someone to - - change?

OR - - to put it another way - - what leads to conversion?

IS it - - a new conviction - - a new inspiration? / OR is it - - a loss of security?

I think that it's - - both - - or it could be both.

But that's the question I will explore this morning:

What leads to conversion?

Loss of security...or...new inspiration and conviction.

Most of the poems I found on the subject suggest that it's the latter:

That is - - loss of security.

For example: In this one by Timmy Thomas

“I am becoming weak and at my lowest point,

Yet I continue running and trying to flee

Feeling more convicted of the sin within me.

Why am I feeling such in-depth pain?

It is because I fooled myself into thinking I could make it all go away.

Only was it then when I saw how lost I was

Did I see that with those condemning eyes came His redeeming love.”

There are a number of poems about the conversion of soldiers in a fox hole or in a situation of combat. Here's one example by Frances Angermeyer:

“I wonder, God, if you'll take my hand
 Somehow I feel that you'll understand
 Funny I had to come to this hellish place
 Before I had time to see your face.
 Well I guess there isn't much more to say
 But I'm sure glad God, that I met you today.”

Or this one by Ella Wilcox:

“But when o'er burning wastes my feet had trod,
 And all my life was desolate with loss,
 With bleeding hands I clung about the cross.”

So there is a lot of evidence - - that conversion is brought about by lack of security.

That is - - there is a threat of a crisis - - and a person converts.

More times than I'd like to admit - - that crisis - - is forced on someone. / There are numerous stories about forced conversions. / The history of conversion - - in the church - - is not pretty. / This next poem by Jean Toomer - - whose grandfather was the first African American governor in the United States - - bears witness to that:

“African Guardian of Souls / Drunk with rum
 Feasting on a strange cassava
 Yeilding to new words and a weak palabra
 Of a white-faced sardonic god - -
 Grins, cries amen. / Shouts hosanna.”

So sometimes it is a lack of security that leads to conversion - - more than inspiration or a genuine conviction about something - - new and true.

But according to the Bible and the book of Acts - - the Holy Spirit can work - - even in those bleak situations. / The book of Acts is full of conflict - - and violent and threatening situations. / Stephen is one of the first apostles - - and he is stoned - - as we read in the reading from chapter 7 and 8.

The early story of Stephen and Philip in Acts chapters 6-8 is about the conflict between Hellenistic Jews and the more traditional Hebrew Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. / This is a family feud among Jewish people - - which is where our religion began. / We are Jewish by our faith ancestry. / Part of WHY Stephen was stoned to death - - was because he was accused of MISINTERPRETING - - Moses.

Stephen - - changed.

He changed what he believed - - about Moses - - and about the Messiah.

And as he is being killed - - he forgives his killers - - for misunderstanding.

But Stephen is committed - - to his conversion - - to this new way.

Another interesting character in the Acts story is Simon. / Simon gets in trouble for trying to BUY his way in. / Simon is intrigued by the Holy Spirit and all that the early Apostles were saying - - but he saw it as an opportunity for personal gain. / And instead of really praying to receive the Holy Spirit - - and devote his life to the way of Jesus - - he tries to BUY the Holy Spirit to use in his magic tricks.

Trying to buy your way in - - is more an indication of a crisis of belief - - than it is an act of genuine inspiration.

So by the time Saul converts to Paul - - in chapter 9 there is plenty of evidence of the challenge and the danger in this new way. / Change is difficult. / And change can be dangerous. / But it is what the Holy Spirit - - seems to be all about:

Change as in conversion.

Conversion to seeing Jesus - - as the WAY - - and the true Messiah.

And Saul's conversion - - is the CENTER POINT in the book.

Saul takes on the name Paul - - when he sees a light on the road to Damascus.

He falls to the ground. / He hears God's voice.

He becomes blind for a time.

And then he CONVERTS - - from being the great persecutor - - to the great Apostle.

Certainly there is a crisis at the heart of his conversion.

But there is also an amazing moment - - of inspiration by the Spirit.

So if we let this early history in the book of Acts serve as the backdrop for our reading from John - - what do we see? / I'll get there in just a minute - - but first I want to say that this will be my strategy for the next few weeks. / My sermons will use the history in Acts - - and the early story of the Holy Spirit in the Apostles - - as the backdrop for the texts from John's gospel.

So what about our reading from John - - chapter 3.

In John 3 we meet Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was secure in his beliefs. / He was a leader of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. / He was a teacher and knew what he believed. / And then he met Jesus...

John's gospel says that Nicodemus met with Jesus at night.

Apparently he didn't want people to know.

But it seems that the encounter with Jesus may have prompted him to come out of the dark and into the light and be more public about his - - conversion.

Was Nicodemus converted?

Or did he and Jesus just have a great respectful interfaith dialogue?

John leaves us hanging in chapter 3.

Nicodemus disappears, and Jesus says some of the most famous things he ever said.

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”

It’s been painted on the cheeks of football fans and players.

But did it influence - - Nicodemus?

Well - - in chapter 7 Nicodemus speaks out in favor of giving Jesus the benefit of the doubt. / He is with his OWN - - a bunch of Jewish priests and Pharisees. / And he urges them to at least give him a trial based on evidence and witnesses. Specifically what he says is, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” / But this puts Nicodemus at odds with his peers...

And THEN in John chapter 19 - - after Jesus is killed and Joseph of Arimathea comes for the body - - there’s Nicodemus! / It’s shocking! / What has Nicodemus been doing all this time? / John says, “Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloë”

What is a Jewish Pharisee doing at the tomb of Jesus?

Why is he there if not because he has - - converted?

Nicodemus has to have - - changed.

At least - - somewhat...

Don’t you think?

So what caused this change in Nicodemus?

Nicodemus was a secure believer.

But something - - upset his security.

Some light - - blinked - - into his night.

What would it take - - to get us to change?

What would it take - - for us to change the world?

Or are you OK with everything - - just the way it is today?

Here are some things I am sure of:

We have to be careful not to try to change people.

People change themselves - - or they don't.

We have to be careful not to use violence or to act on mixed motives.

And we have to beware of being too secure.

Sometimes a little bit of crisis is what it takes.

But then - - after the crisis - - can we be open to the Spirit.

Can we let the Holy Spirit truly MAKE us and SHAPE us?

Can the Spirit be - - who makes us who we are?

Well those are some of my questions. / Nicodemus had questions too about all of this.

And it all reminds me of some questions my niece Maggie had before surgery.

She was 4 years old - - and going for surgery - - and these were her four questions:

Why are we here?

What are we doing?

Will it hurt?

Will you be with me?

The first two questions are the heart of the matter for me:

Why are we here?

and what are we doing? - - seem to be the core questions.

Are we here to know the love of God is Jesus?

Are we doing what we can to share that love?

And to share it with everyone - - whatever they believe - - today...

Because whatever a person believes - - it can change.

But hopefully - - the change is for the better.

And - - then the other two questions.

And for these two questions put yourself in Nicodemus place.

You are meeting Jesus - - and talking with Jesus about YOUR questions:

Will it hurt?

Maybe.

Will you be WITH me?

Always.

One more time...

Will it hurt?

Maybe

Will you be with me?

Always.