

Sunday, January 25, 2009
St. Paul
Conversion

The great St. Paul. I make no hesitancy in saying that. I know Paul gets rapped so many times and we get so hard on him and yet he is THE theological and spiritual genius that sets the stage for everything that follows. Because Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, made the Kingdom of God a reality in his very Being and His life. And it's Paul who theologized about it, spread it throughout the world, and then gave us the vehicle to allow that kingdom to come – and that's the church. Paul really is probably much more the founder of the church than Jesus was. And, yet, he wasn't even aware that he was founding a church. He had no intention of founding a church. He wanted to reform Judaism according to what happens today.

Today really is a big day. If we understand today, we can understand a lot of patterns in our own life because today is all about Paul's conversion. He was a good Jew, he followed the law, he never did anything wrong. And yet, in the name of God - this is what happens when we get caught outside of the reality of God - in the name of God, he was a murderer. He was killing people. He watched Steven be stoned and he was agreeing to that. And then something happened. He met the Lord. He radically met Jesus and everything changed. He was con-verted. And all that Paul is trying to do from that time on is to get everybody else he's proclaiming to to have the same experience that he had.

Today I don't use the word 'conversion' so much because it sounds like a one-shot deal – You're not converted and then you're converted. But, much more the word 'transformation' – to become a new creation. And transformation is an on-going process.

What I want to do today is describe what conversion looks like. Because where Paul is, we go. And what happened to Paul is supposed to happen to us. But we'll probably not fall off our horse. By the way, there's no horse mentioned anywhere in the Gospel. All it says is that he fell to the ground. And he was blinded. But he was blinded before he fell to the ground because he didn't really see the great reality. But when he got up he had to contemplate what was going on because he heard a voice that said, 'Why are you persecuting me?' Paul said, 'Who are you?' And Jesus said, 'Jesus'.

Of course, Paul's first thought is well, I'm not persecuting Jesus. I'm persecuting these people. These people that don't follow the law. I'm persecuting them. It was only later that he begins to discover that when he persecutes them, he's persecuting God. He had a conversion.

What does a conversion look like? What does it feel like? How do you see it in your own life when you are going through a conversion process? We're going to take a little look at that today. It is probably the most profound pattern and process of all our life because it's the paschal process – Something dies and something is born. Something goes out, and there's something so much more profound that comes into being.

The first thing that we need to understand about conversion is that it's not a head trip. I don't care how much you think you know about Jesus. There are a lot of wonderful scripture scholars who don't believe. And the reason they don't believe is because it's all in their head. But, the very first thing you need to know about conversion transformation is that it's an **experience**. Whatever happened to Paul on the road to Damascus was the most profound experience of his life. What did he experience? He experiences the presence of Jesus in him. In him. Not about him, in him.

We had all our confirmande here yesterday and all I talked to them about was meeting Jesus. I don't care how much you know about Jesus. You haven't met Him until...It's like when you meet

your best friend. You intimately know your girlfriend or boyfriend or parents, brothers and sisters. If not, then you don't know.

The saying that 'God has no grandchildren' means that you can't have your faith off of your grandmother's experience, or even your mother's or father's experience. All God has is people who have a direct experience with Him. The Protestants and Evangelicals really have this right when they talk about a 'personal relationship to Jesus'. We as Catholics think that we can just follow the rules or the laws...I'm sorry you can't. But we have got to want that. We have got to desire that. I told the children last night that you have got to want it with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. And He will never refuse that. Knock and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Ask and it shall be given to you. The Holy Spirit is yours and it's an experience.

First and foremost it's not a head trip, it's an experience. And then once that happens, once you experience Christ...For Paul it was organic. It was so organic that the person that was converted, the person who is in the process of conversion, the person in the process of transformation does not look out at reality anymore. They look out at the problem of reality.

We somehow think that God, the Ultimate Reality, is out there. And we are over here looking out at God. We think that God has the goodies and we have to do something and jump through hoops to get to God. That's pre-conversion. But, once you have the experience of God (the conversion), you realize that God isn't out there. God's in here. And, if you are that intimate with God, if you experience that presence of God, it's a different way of knowing. It's not a rational knowing. It is an intuitive, radical, immediate knowing. All of a sudden you're looking at reality from a whole different set of lenses. There's a basic change of perspective. It's a perfect revolution. All of a sudden, the sun is not revolving around the world. The world is revolving around the sun. All of a sudden you're not seeing through your eyes out at God – YOU'RE SEEING THROUGH GOD'S EYES. It is a radical change of perspective. And when that happens, and this is so key...here's one of the ways you know that you're on the road to conversion and that you've had that radical experience with God, is that you can see it in other people as well. You are now participating in what God is doing.

We're all taught that we are the ones who are in charge of our life. From the time we toilet train children, we teach them to take control of their lives to do what they've got to do. And the reality that they create is it's all about how you perform, and how well you do, and what kind of grades you get, and how smart you are, and how skinny you are, and how blond you are, and how rich you are, and it goes on and on and on -- And you're out of breath and exhausted. One of the ways you know that you are not participating in the Life of God is that you're always tired. Always tired. Why? Because you have to create reality. You've got to invent the story of your life. The converted person doesn't have to invent anything. All they have to do is participate in what God is doing. Life is participating.

You've got nothing to prove. You've got nothing really to teach. All you've got to do is share what God is doing in the world in your life, your life and the life of the world. You don't have to rewrite the story of the Word. It's already written. All you're called to do is participate. It's wonderful. It's so wonderful because you're not judged on how right you are or how clever you are or how good you are, or how hard you work. That's really bad news. The good news is the story's already written and you're an instrument of that story. That's all! It's as simple as that. I want to be converted. I want to know God that intimately so that I can be His instrument. So that I can somehow be useful to God. To be His tool so he can work through me. When that happens there's this radical shift because at that point life's not about you, or how successful you are, or how well you do. At that point you're about life. You're about whatever God is doing. And, I'll tell you, it's a million pounds off your shoulders.

This was really my conversion point – My brother grabbed me one night about midnight, looked at my eyes...this is my conversion line, and he said, 'When did God retire and you took over?' Great line. It really was true. I'll dance for you, I'll work for you...love me, love me, love me. He said, 'He

already loves you, you goofus. You don't have anything to prove. You got nothing that you have to do. Just participate in what God is doing.'

And it's not even about doing it right. We are such judgmental people. We judge everything. It's simply about doing it. It's simply saying 'yes' to whatever God is doing in the world. And what is God doing in the world? God is reconciling the world. God is bringing us into some kind of communion with each other and showing us who we really are – all brothers and sisters. Because he is intimately as connected to them as he is to us. And that's a revolution. That's a whole other way of seeing reality. A whole other set of lenses to live reality.

And, at that point we become less self-conscious. We become what the mystics call 'God-conscious'. We go from sub consciousness to what the mystics call pure consciousness, or Christ consciousness.

When you're 13 years old you become very self-conscious, right? How am I doing? How am I looking? Is my hair in place? You're not participating in the self consciousness of God. And then the self-consciousness is the dualistic split. Me against the world. There's me and then there's you. Somehow you're the enemy. Somehow I've got to cajole you or make you happy. In Christ consciousness there's no split. Your consciousness is Christ's consciousness. You see through Christ's eyes.

An analogy to that is probably the first time you ever fell in love. Remember the very first time? All of a sudden...I can't eat, I can't drink, I'm in love. What basically happens when you fall in love is your ego boundaries break down. And you're 17 years old and you're like, 'Oh, God, I can't think about anything but Mary Lou and she's always on my mind'. True love. That's kind of like what it feels like. Or the first time the mother holds her baby in her arms. And all of a sudden here's something radically outside of her that is so much a part of her and she loves it so radically that the two become one. And she loses herself in the other.

What's amazing is we think, at that point, that we lose our identity. I always tell young couples, 'When you get married you are so in awe of your beloved that you self sacrifice yourself for that person. And what is so paradoxically amazing is that the more that you lose yourself in your beloved, the more you become who you truly are.' It's a real paradox. Well, that's what converted, transformed, Christ-consciousness looks like.

And it's always working. It's always going on. When you are converted you go from tribalism to universalism. We get our false sense identity, our first identity (who we think we are) by comparison and separation. And we become real persons by communion and relationship. And it's good to go off to a tribe. It's good to have a name. It's good to have a culture. It's good to have a color of your skin. But, all of a sudden, those are not the things that really count. So I can honestly say God Bless America. I love America. But, even more, I say God Bless Humanity. Because from God's perspective there is no north, south, east or west. We all are one in Him. And the converted person becomes a universal person. He gets to see humanity in all peoples. And the line of demarcation that separates me and you begins to not disappear, but all of a sudden it's not important. There's something much more powerful and much more profound.

Abraham Pestule(?) said that the person who is converted, the great sign of one who has been converted is the sense of radical amazement, all of a sudden everything is good.

I want to go back to the first time you ever fell in love. The whole world was beautiful, you've never see the leaves and the trees outside of your house and you fell in love and you go, 'Isn't that a beautiful leaf?' It reminds me of Susie. (laughter) It's a radical amazement. And how glorious the world is we are living in right now, how beautiful everything really is.

One of the other things that happens when you are in a converted state or the process of transformation is that you are able to be self critical without being self hating. They know their

faults. They know there's a character flaw. They know there's a disease. And yet they don't loathe themselves because they have been touched by a higher power. They have experienced a power greater than them that they are able to turn their life over to. That's basically the conversion experience. When the book is written, it's probably going to be 'The American Gift to Spirituality'. Wonderful stuff. And they can be very critical. I can be very critical of my faults, my character flaws. And they keep on coming back and you want them to go away. I talk too long and...Underneath it all, radically, I'm being held by name by someone who can hold me and name me better than I could ever hold or name myself. Because holding and naming myself I'm always thinking I've got to be perfected and then I become self hating and self loathing. Always less than perfect.

St. Paul had a phrase for this - I live 'in Cristo'. The small self doesn't go away, but all of a sudden it's not that important. One of the ways you know that you are not in Cristo yet and still caught in the small self, a false self, is that you are very easily offended and you're always looking for someone to blame. If you are always offended...because what gets offended isn't who you really are. What gets offended is who you think you are - your reputation, your name, all that stuff. Ego is very fragile. And the Ego is always protecting itself. And it doesn't like to be attacked. The more offended you are, the less you are in God. And the more you're going to blame - 'Oh, my life would be wonderful if it wasn't for you.' The more you blame, the less you are in God.

It's almost impossible to offend the true self. Another thing that happens in conversion is that the heart and head come together a whole lot better. The head can only take us so far. Religion is not a head trip. Faith is not a head trip. Faith and knowledge are not opposites. They work with each other but they just take you here. But then there's a breakthrough. And in that breakthrough you have a knowledge that is not a rational knowledge that goes beyond reason. It's a heart knowledge. The mystics say heart-to-heart speaking. The heart of God speaking to the heart of you.

And, after conversion, one of the ways you're going to know a converted person is there's a child-likeness about them. Not childish. Child-like. Why? Because they have humility now to play. Why do they have humility to play? Because they don't have to save the world. Because the world's already saved. A million pounds are taken off your shoulders because as St. Paul says, 'I live now not I - Christ lives in me.' And the big question has already been answered. You don't have to create reality. All we need to do is participate in the reality of Christ as we play. The human one at play.

The hardest thing in conversion. By far, the hardest thing you'll ever have to do...Everyone is called to conversion. The hardest thing you'll ever have to do is to accept being accepted just because you are. God loves you as you are. We are taught in early childhood that everything is measured and everything is earned. That may be true of the outer world. St. Paul tells us clearly this world, this outer world and it's passing away. The world as you know it is falling apart. In the real world, the inner world, the world where God dwells, and you go with God, there is nothing to be earned. Can you accept the fact that you are loved, not for what you're doing but simply because He loves you. There is no greater freedom on earth. You're only going to love as God loves you. And you will only love God the way that you allow God to love you. You're only going to love others in reality and the Earth and Universe the way that you allow God to love you.

What's that way? How did he love you? Without condition. Just as you are. Can you believe that?