A Converting Community

Acts 9:1-20

A sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, on the Third Sunday of Easter, April 10, 2016.

During these Sunday’s of Easter, we are studying the hallmarks of The Church of the Risen Savior, as portrayed in Acts. Last week, we considered the church as A Witnessing Community, bearing bold proclamation to the living Christ who continues to grant repentance and forgiveness. Today we look at the church as A Converting Community, where Christ continues to transform hearts and lives, making us new.

From 1969 to 1973, Charles “Chuck” Colson was Special Counsel to President Richard Nixon. Professing himself to be a nominal Episcopalian, the following quote is attributed to him: “Oh I think religion is fine, provided one has as little as possible.” However, following a meeting with a recent Billy Graham convert, Chuck Colson had a conversion experience himself, developing a relationship with God that would sustain him and other inmates, while he was incarcerated for Watergate related charges. Chuck Colson founded Prison Fellowship and wrote the best seller Born Again, introducing America to this term for conversion that was relatively unknown outside of evangelical circles. Do you remember when Jesus told Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, that he must be born again, better translated “born from above” in order to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3-5)?

Being “Born Again” was the conversion catch phrase in my deep-South youth. In the name of evangelism, zealous Christians would go door-to-door or pass-out tracks, asking if you were born again. If met with a blank stare, elaboration of the question was required. “Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior,” they would ask, implying that a corporate relationship was inferior to a one-on-one relationship. There seemed to be a blindness to the possibility that growing-up in the faith, being baptized as an infant, and taking-on those promises in Confirmation could qualify as being born again. Lots of “I-language” was required to convince the inquisitor of your conversion. (I was convicted of my sin. I walked down the aisle to
accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. I was baptized by full immersion.) In the absence of an emotional conversion experience, your relationship with God was suspect. Of course, this was not what Chuck Colson had in mind in relating his born-again experience. In his conversion, God was the actor, choosing, calling and advancing the kingdom, allowing him to more fully participate in God’s work. When speaking of conversion, we do well to remember that God is the subject and we are the object of the verb. Yes, we have free-will to choose, but God remains the actor. C.S. Lewis described his conversion experience as “the steady unrelenting approach of him who I so earnestly desired not to meet.” Chuck Colson understood this and like Paul, conversion completely transformed his life and set him on a new course.

Luke, the author of Acts, tells the story of Paul’s conversion three times (Acts 9:1-6, 22:6-16 and 26:12-18), driving home its importance in the life of the nascent Christian community. While “on his way” to Damascus, armed with the authority to arrest and extradite those who belonged to “The Way”, Paul was blinded by a light from heaven, thrown to the ground, and accosted by the voice of Jesus. Paul was headed “straight” for the synagogues of Damascus, a 150 mile journey northeast of Jerusalem, but now, unable to see and reeling from an encounter with the resurrected and ascended Jesus, he is led by the hand to a street called “Straight,” where he will contemplate his persecution of Christ for three days before Ananias arrives on the scene. Both Paul and Ananias are given a vision of the other, one being healed by a leader of The Way, the other healing a renowned persecutor of the Christian community. Both are being recalibrated to a new way of seeing, being and acting as God does a new thing.

Blind, Paul contemplates what he thought he had seen so clearly. Thinking he was righteous before the Lord for zealously pursuing those who would pervert the Jewish faith, he now realizes that he was really blind to what God was doing in Christ Jesus. But it was not only Paul’s blindness that is being addressed. Ananias, skeptical at first, would need to see Paul as God’s instrument. Perhaps Ananias’ initial hesitancy was due to his belief that Paul was too far gone for salvation and fellowship (Acts 9:13). Ananias would need to be transformed in order to address Paul as “brother” (Acts 9:17). Rather than seeing Paul as a persecutor after Christian blood, Ananias would need to see Paul as follower and proclaimer of Jesus’ redemptive blood. Paul’s blindness and Ananias’ blindness both serve as a caution to us.
Thinking we have God figured out, we may persist in our self-righteousness rather than joining in what God is doing in the world. Conversion is not a one-time shot, but a continual transformation as the scales fall from our eyes to see where God is at work today.

My own conversion and call to ministry seems to pale in comparison to the Apostle Paul. As a ten year old boy, I attended Park Place Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. On Sunday’s, the bus would pick me up and transport me to and from Sunday School and church. Brother Batson, the pastor, had a delivery like a pneumatic drill, convincing me of my sinfulness and pointing me to Christ. The Holy Spirit propelled me down the aisle to make a profession of faith and to be baptized the following Sunday evening. Over time, the church universal assisted me in discerning a Call to ordained ministry. It is a fairly typical conversion story of recognizing sinfulness, asking for forgiveness, embracing a calling and growing in faithfulness. In the absence of a notorious past, conversion seems rather bland. However, each of our conversions is amazing when you look more closely.

After President Nixon resigned, Chuck Colson began to rebuild his law practice. Hoping to represent Raytheon, he met with the CEO, Tom Philips, who shared his recent conversion at a Billy Graham Crusade. Tom Philips read aloud to Chuck Colson from C.S. Lewis’ *The Great Sin*, the chapter on pride from *Mere Christianity*. Tom Philips prayed with Chuck Colson and that evening, Chuck Colson bowed his head on the steering-wheel of his car and prayed for God’s intervention in his life. God was at work through Billy Graham. God was at work through Tom Philips. God used these faithful men to show Chuck Colson “the way”.

God was at work on the Damascus Road. God was at work through Ananias, using him to show Paul “the way”.

God was at work through that volunteer who drove the bus to transport me to and from church. God was at work through my Sunday School teacher. God was at work through Brother Batson to show me “the way.”

And God remains at work through each of us and this community of faith, transforming hearts and lives and making us new. Here we are equipped to be God’s hands and feet in the world as we are shaped by God’s word, washed in the waters of baptism and fed at the table. The risen and ascended Jesus promises to meet us “on the way”, a continual conversion,
as the scales are removed from our eyes to clearly see the new thing God is doing in our midst. Along “the way,” God will use us to bring others to faith, a converting community, transforming hearts and lives. Amen.

1) Christianity Today Jonathan Aitken/ APRIL 21, 2012
Remembering Charles Colson, a Man Transformed, The real story of how "Nixon's hatchet man" ended up in, out, and back in prison (and the White House), shaping a movement in the process.

2) From Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life (1955), Chapter XIV.
In this autobiography of his childhood, Lewis recounts the process of his own conversion as a young professor at Oxford in the 1930s.