

## The Last Conversion of Peter: Overcoming Racial and Religious Bigotry

Acts 10:9-16; 44-48

I call it “The Last Conversion of Peter.” He needed more than one, as do most of us. And this conversion was about overcoming religious and racial bigotry. Bigotry has been defined as a devotion to one’s prejudice. And prejudice is our opinion of people based on limited experience and knowledge. Sometimes we fall in love with our prejudices! Some just love to hate bigots! I love this short poem:

He drew a circle that shut me out—  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win.  
We drew a circle and took him in.

That sounds like Jesus.

### I

Peter’s first conversion was at the seashore where he was fishing. Jesus said, “Follow me”, and Peter left his nets and followed. It was his first turning to Jesus. The missionary theologian E. Stanley Jones describes this first turning, Peter’s and ours: We give as much of ourselves as we can to as much of Christ as

we know. Then the adventure of discipleship begins as we discover more and more of ourselves we can give and more and more of Christ we can give ourselves to!

The second conversion of Peter happened just after Jesus told his disciples that he was on his way to Jerusalem, where he would be arrested and die on a Roman cross. Peter objected vehemently: “Lord, this should never happen to you!” And Jesus rebuked him sternly, saying, “Get thee behind me Satan! Peter, these are not God’s thoughts but human thinking.” Then Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me let them deny self, take up their own cross and follow me.”

“Follow me” involves a cross. What might the cross mean for us? I think it means being willing to bear the opposition of the world as you live Christ’s way. I think it means that as you bear your own suffering, or cross, you lift your suffering up to God for God’s healing and comfort and strength. And I think it means being willing to take up the suffering of others to help them bear their load. This was Peter’s second conversion, the conversion of the cross.

His third conversion I’d call “The conversion of grace.” It happened after Easter. The disciples had gone back to fishing. The Risen Jesus showed up on the seashore early one morning, and called out, “Boys, caught anything?” “It is the Lord!”, John said, and Peter didn’t wait for the boat; he jumped overboard and thrashed his way to shore.

Then the Risen Jesus became a short-order cook and made them breakfast over the open fire. After breakfast, Jesus turned to Peter, and it was as if they were the only two in the world. Three times Jesus asked “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?”, and three times Peter professed his love: “Yes Lord, I love you.” And every time Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” Jesus was re-habilitating Peter, “re-calling” Peter. Three times on the night before Jesus’ death, Peter had denied even knowing him. Now three times he was given the grace to be able to profess his love. Jesus was giving Peter a new chance, as we all need at times in our lives. Then Jesus said all over again: “Follow me.” Grace.

## II

Now we come to Peter’s last conversion. He had this trouble with prejudice, especially a prejudice against Gentiles, whom he had been taught were unclean and unacceptable to God. His bigotry was racial and it was religious.

In the Broadway musical *South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein snuck in a song about prejudice:

You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear,  
you’ve got to be taught from year to year.  
It’s got to be drummed in your dear little ear,  
you’ve got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid  
of people whose eyes are oddly made  
and people whose skin is a different shade,  
you've got to be carefully taught.

With apologies to Rodgers and Hammerstein I've added this verse:

You've got to be taught to be afraid  
of people with different D.N.A.  
and people not born in the U.S. of A,  
You've got to be carefully taught.

We learn our bigotry in home, in church, and in the cultural circles we live in. It's passed on. To use a biblical verse: "the parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge."

The church tragically has not escaped racial bigotry. In his exhaustive research, Robert P. Jones has concluded that in our nation the greatest single indicator of racialized attitudes, more than age, geography or education, is being a white Christian. The church has been an incubator of White Supremacy.

Nor has the church escaped the bigotry inherent in the idea of Christian Supremacy. There is a powerful movement of Christian Supremacy in America that is attacking the separation church and state and redefining religious liberty

as set forth in the First Amendment of the Constitution. It is a movement that seeks to encode into national law the moral code of one brand of Christianity and privileging that brand of the Christian religion over all other religions. Instead of our American experiment in pluralistic democracy, it prefers a theocracy.

How are we to respond as followers of Christ and as a church to this rise of religious and racial bigotry?

### III

So let's return to Peter and his last conversion. His biggest prejudices were against the Gentiles. Unlike Paul, who grew up among Gentiles, all Peter knew about Gentiles was what he had been told—which is not a very good way to learn about others.

Good Jews, he believed, should not mix with unclean Gentiles, should not eat with them, surely not worship with them. There was still a lot of Archie Bunker in Saint Peter! Jesus does not change us overnight.

The early church based in Jerusalem was split on what to do with Gentile converts to Christ. Some on the most conservative side said that they should not be admitted to the church at all. Those on the liberal side, like Paul, wanted them fully welcomed.

Those in the middle thought that Gentiles should be allowed to join, but only if they first became Jews—which for the men meant circumcision! As you might imagine, that would cut down on converts. It “hindered” the spread of the gospel. Imagine going to a New Members class and in the last session the pastor said, “Now there’s one more tiny thing we need to mention!”

There are many churches that say “All are welcome”, but in practice they mean “You are welcome if you become just like us.”

#### IV

Peter was struggling mightily with his attitudes toward the Gentile converts to Christ. Then the Holy Spirit intervened!

As in last week’s sermon, the story begins with a split screen. On one side is Cornelius, a Roman centurion, part of the “Italian Cohort”, a man with Roman military authority and a Gentile. He was an uncommonly good man who had given generously to help people in need, including those in the Jewish community.

An angel appeared to him and said, “Send some of your men to Joppa, find a man named Peter staying at a tanner’s house near the seashore.”

Now on the other side of the split screen is Peter. He is on the roof of a house near the seashore in Joppa, and he is praying. He’d been praying so long

that he began to grow hungry. Ever had your stomach begin to growl during Sunday prayers at church?

Peter fell into a trance, and a vision came to him. He saw a large sheet, like a super-sized tablecloth, being lowered from heaven, and it was filled with animals—the kind of unclean animals that Jews were forbidden to eat. Kosher hell!

Then a voice from heaven said, “Kill and eat!” Peter said, “No Lord! I have never let anything unclean pass my lips!” Have you ever heard yourself say something like: “I have never....?” Or, “I would never!”

But the voice said, “*What God has cleansed you must not call ‘common’!*” In the South, I’ve heard the expression: “She’s just common. He’s just common!” Poor white, poor black, name your prejudice.

Peter was confounded. What could this vision, this message mean?

Just then, the men from Cornelius arrived and invited Peter to return with them to Cornelius’ home. Now truly observant Jews weren’t supposed to stay in the homes of Gentiles, eat and drink with them. Clean and unclean do not mix.

Do any of you remember the days in the South when public swimming pools had, by law, to be integrated, black and white children and grown-ups now

swimming together? In some cities they chose to shut down the public pool instead.

But Peter had begun to ponder this vision and its message about clean and unclean. And when Cornelius' men showed up he made the connection: Unclean animals, unclean people—*what God has cleansed let no one call common*. So off he went the next morning to Caesarea and Cornelius' house.

## V

Then something even more remarkable happened. When Peter got there, Cornelius invited him in to share a meal—was Peter at first nervous? Then Cornelius asked him to share the gospel of Jesus with the entire household and all those present.

Then, as Peter was preaching the gospel, the Holy Spirit interrupted the sermon! (I hate when that happens!) The Holy Spirit fell on everyone—Jew *and* Gentile! The Jews who had come there with Peter were astounded, shocked! The Holy Spirit had fallen “*even*” on the Gentiles! Jews and Gentiles alike speaking in tongues and praising God!

Peter said, “Can anyone forbid water, [that is, the water of baptism], to these who have received the Holy Spirit like we have?” The unhindered gospel was on the move! So Peter baptized them all, right then and there. Like Phillip in



last week's story, he didn't wait for approval from headquarters in Jerusalem. He just acted. Spirit-led!

## VI

I was thinking about how God works in overcoming religious and racial bigotry. It's a combination of experience and Spirit. Our getting to know people who are different from us and God's Spirit opening our eyes. In today's text the Spirit got Peter and Cornelius together under the same roof, then helped things happen.

Think about your own growing appreciation and understanding of people who are different from you. Your getting to know them gave the Spirit an opportunity to work.

There's a text in the gospels that is too little considered. Evidently Jesus is being accused of being a Samaritan. As with the Gentiles, the Samaritans were despised for religious and racial reasons. For hundreds of years those in Samaria had intermarried with outsiders, non-Jews. And they worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses differently.

Jews traveling from Jerusalem to Galilee would choose a longer route around, just to avoid having to travel through Samaria. Jesus traveled *through*. And in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, we see Jesus bringing the

gospel to the Samaritans. He made Samaritans heroes in his parables. Maybe, his enemies accused, he *was* a Samaritan!

So one day some people came to him and said, “It’s going around that you are possessed by demons and that you are a Samaritan. Are you?” and Jesus said, “I’m not demon possessed.” He let the racialized question about being a Samaritan hang in the air. He refused to defend his racial and religious purity. Such things are not of God.

## VII

I think Paul got that message when he said, “In Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, master or slave, male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” These worldly distinctions still exist but they’ve lost their power to divide us and control us.

And Paul said at the end of his letter to the Galatians, in large letters:

Circumcision means nothing!

Uncircumcision means nothing!

The only thing that matters is the New Creation!

This New Creation is breaking down the walls of division that are a part of the old creation. Race, religion, gender, sexuality, education, social class. All of them. They no longer matter.

I think we could call Peter's last conversion a "New Creation conversion."

Look all around. I see it happening today as churches are welcoming the spiritual gifts of people once excluded and are becoming richer and richer in God.

It's like the hymn we love and the grace we sing:

I once was lost but now am found,

was blind but now I see.