

The Continuous Conversion

John 21:1-17

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It was one of those mornings you remember forever. Early morning by the seashore, the air is crisp, the mists are rising off the water. A campfire is going. But this morning will be unforgettable for another reason. Easter is in the air.

I

The disciples had gone back to fishing, fishing, that is, for fish. No reason to fish for people anymore. Back to the Sea of Galilee where Jesus had first called them to follow. Peter had rounded them up. They had fished all night and caught nothing.

A stranger appeared on the shore. Here is the Risen Christ *incognito* again, this time as a curious vacationer. He yelled across the water: “Guys, caught anything yet?” “Not a one”, they yelled back. Then he said, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you’ll find some.” They did, and the net was full to the breaking, so full they couldn’t haul it into the boat. It was the beloved disciple, the one we identify as John, who got it first: “It is the Lord!”, he shouted. Then Peter, ever impulsive Peter, jumped overboard and thrashed his way to shore. He wasn’t waiting for the boat.

The rest came ashore. There was Jesus, the short-order cook, cooking them breakfast over the charcoal fire. “Bring me some fish”, Jesus said. Peter jumped up and hauled the whole net full of fish. The text says that there were 153 fish. Big ones! That’s how we know they were real fishermen. They counted every one! And “big ones” they bragged.

Scholars through the centuries have puzzled over the symbolic meaning of the number 153. What could this mean? Raymond Brown, the greatest scholar of John in the world commented on this puzzle in class one day. He said that he had had this dream. He died and went to heaven. When he got to Jesus he asked, “Why did the story say there were 153 fish? What’s the meaning?” And Jesus replied, “Because that’s how many there *were!*”

Then Jesus cooked breakfast for them. The text says, “He took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.” Does that sound familiar? The feeding of the 5,000, the Last Supper? Jesus the Risen One would keep on feeding us! The last Supper was not the last. It would go on and on forever.

II

Then after the meal Jesus turned to Peter, and it was as if they were the only two on the shore.

Jesus said, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (He used the name with which he first called Peter.) “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Then Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Tend my sheep.”

Then a third time Jesus asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” After the second question, the third was inevitable. Peter had “denied” Jesus three times around another camp fire on the night of Jesus’ arrest. “I do not know the man!” Then, “No, I’m not one of them.” Then swearing, he said, “I do not know him!”

With the third question Peter was cut to the heart. He answered, “Lord, you know everything. You know I love you!” And Jesus answered, “Feed my sheep.” Take care of my flock, my little ones.

Then he said, “Follow me,” just as he had said that day by the seashore when he first called him.

Jesus was forgiving him and calling him anew. This is what happened on all of Jesus’ resurrection appearances to his disciples: the grace of forgiveness and the grace of a new call.

And this is what can happen to us. Have you ever disappointed someone you love terribly? What you want to do most is to assure them how much you love

them and desire a chance to begin anew. Jesus offered this to Peter and offers it to us.

It was what I call “the conversion of grace.” When we’ve done our worst Jesus comes loving us *all the way down and all the way back*.

III

But the “conversion of grace” was not Peter’s first conversion, nor would it be his last. As one has said, it takes a lifetime of conversions to become what God has created and called us to be.

And this is true for the church too. This church, every church, the Church. Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung wrote:

The church must be reformed again and again, converted again and again each day, in order to fulfill its task.

It sounds like the Protestant Reformation slogan: “*The church reformed and always being reformed!*”

Luke records that at the Last Supper Jesus turned to Peter and said:

Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail’ and

when you have turned again (been converted again), strengthen your brothers (Luke 22:31-2).

We need a continuous conversion, a daily turning. What fresh turning do you need this day; what fresh turning does our church need today?

IV

How many times was Peter converted? Of course, only God knows, but here are a few I count.

The first conversion was the initial call by the seashore. Jesus met Simon and his brother and said, “Follow me and I’ll make you fishers of people.” And “immediately” they left their nets and followed him.

The first turning, first conversion, was itself a two-phase conversion. The first turning was away from the world to Christ. Now the word “world” has two different meanings in the Bible. It can mean the good world created and blessed by God. This is the world we love and rejoice in.

This is the world the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay described when looking at the beauty of a fall day: “O World, I cannot hold thee close enough.”

But then there is the “world” as that realm so corrupt it acts against the purposes of God. This is the world we have made, which now acts back on us to damage and destroy. This is the “world” as described by the poet Wordsworth:

The world is too much with us; late and soon.

Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.

We make societies and shape cultures, then they shape us. This is the world we are to be *in*, but not *of*.

So, we turn away from this world to Christ. But this is only half of it. The other half is to then turn back to the world to love it with God’s own love. We become fishers of people, hauling them in out of the storm. Lovers of people drawing them into the love of God.

So the first conversion. I call it “the disciple’s conversion.” A turning from the world to Christ, then back to the world with the love of Christ.

V

The second conversion was what I call “the conversion of the cross.” Jesus and his disciples were at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus suddenly asked: “Who do people say that I am?” Pop quiz. The hands shot up. I know, I know! Some say “John the Baptist come back to life.” Others say “Elijah returned!”

“But who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked. Pause. This time only Peter’s hand shot up. “You are the Christ, the Messiah, son of the Living God!” Jesus said, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of John! Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my *Abba* in heaven.” Peter must have beamed.

But then Jesus told them that he must go to Jerusalem and be put to death. Peter cried out: “God forbid, Lord, this shall never happen to you!” And Jesus said, “Get behind me Satan!” From a messenger of God to a messenger of Satan, all in a moment.

Peter could not comprehend a suffering Messiah. It was a contradiction in terms, a theological impossibility. When the Messiah came there was supposed to be the end of suffering.

But this Messiah did not come to end all suffering but to be with us in all suffering. We would be saved by love. The “conversion of the cross” teaches us how to bear our own suffering and how to bear the suffering of others as an act of love.

V

The third conversion was what I have already called “the conversion of grace.” This is what happened in today’s story at the seashore, Christ forgiving

him and calling him anew. Grace upon grace upon grace. Anne Lamott has said that grace gets us to a place when we had no way of getting there on our own.

But we see in scripture one more conversion for Peter. We see it in Acts. It's what I call "the conversion of the New Creation." It is the expansion of grace into the whole world, *grace on a social scale*. It is a reconciling grace that overcomes the bigotries and divisions of the old creation. Peter would learn that grace *received* without *giving it on* is no grace at all.

Peter had experienced the conversion of grace but he, and the early church, had this little bigotry problem. Jews should not mix with unclean Gentiles: It was a racial issue and a religious issue. There was still some Archie Bunker left in Simon Peter. The church also was not ready for this kind of change.

One day Peter was on a rooftop in Joppa praying. He had been praying so long he was hungry. He fell into a trance. Then came a vision of a huge tablecloth coming down from heaven filled with all kinds of unclean animals, the kind good Jews should never eat. Kosher Hell.

A Voice from heaven said, "Kill and eat!" Peter said, "No Lord, *I have never* let anything unclean pass my mouth!" Have you ever said something like "I have never!"?

But then the voice said, “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.” Then, at that instant a messenger came from the house of Cornelius, a well known Gentile, inviting Peter to come eat with him. Eating in the home of an unclean Gentile?! Then the meaning of the vision dawned on him: Unclean food/unclean people. What God has cleansed you shall not call common!

So Peter went to Cornelius’ house where Cornelius asked him to talk about Jesus. Before Peter had even finished his sermon, the Holy Spirit fell upon them all, just like at Pentecost! Sometimes God doesn’t wait for the sermon. Sometimes the Spirit doesn’t wait for the church! It looses itself in the world and the church runs to catch up!

Peter had been converted again! His eyes, and his heart had been opened. Then he baptized them on the spot. He didn’t check with the headquarters in Jerusalem for approval. He just did it. Grace won.

VI

This is the message of the gospel: Grace Wins. And if it’s not for *all*, it’s not grace.

It’s what got hold of the Apostle Paul too, who had his own bigotries to overcome (women and gay people to name two). In Galatia the issue was Jew vs.

Gentile bigotry, and the legalists in the church. The legalists said, You've got to be full-fledged Jew to be a Christian.

At the end of the letter to the Galatians he wrote in large letters:

Circumcision means nothing!

Uncircumcision means nothing!

The only thing that matters is the New Creation! (Gal. 6:15)

So, could we say today:

Jew means nothing

Gentile means nothing

Straight means nothing

Gay means nothing

Race means nothing

Gender means nothing

Class means nothing.

The only thing that matters is

The New Creation!

In a world where there is such racial and religious hatred and where nationalism parades as a god, let us be part of God's New Creation where the divisions of the old creation fall away and lose their power to harm.

The missionary theologian, E. Stanley Jones described the first turning to Christ this way: To give as much of yourself as you can to as much of Christ as you know. Then the adventure begins! To discover more and more of yourself you can give and more and more of Christ to give yourself to. We begin a lifetime of conversions. It is the wildest and most wonderful ride I know!