

Sermon ☩ May 29, 2022

Acts 16:16-34

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Years ago, when I was first ordained as a pastor, one of my biggest worries was . . . “*How on earth can I write a sermon every week? Won’t I run out of stuff to say?*”

So here we are some 47 years later, and the answer is, “*No, I won’t . . . At least not yet.*”

Case in point, in all of these years, I’ve never really talked about conversion. Truth be told . . . I’ve always thought of conversion as a Baptist / Evangelical kind of topic.

For me, the word *conversion* conjures up images of some guy knocking on my door on a Sunday afternoon.

After his initial greeting, he thrusts a small pamphlet into my hand . . . something that looks much more like a comic book than serious religious material.

He then informs me that unless I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior exactly as it is described in his pamphlet . . . unless I believe . . . when I die, my soul will burn forever in the damnable and unquenchable fires of hell for all of eternity. He then says, “*Have a nice day,*” and walks away.

Well, that kind of talk creeps me out. And unfortunately, when it comes to the topic of *conversion*, that’s the kind of image that usually flashes into my head.

But conversion is what we are to be about as Christians. It is what John speaks of in today’s gospel and there is a vivid example in the lesson from Acts.

And, while I *may* have talked about conversion in the past, I seldom use the word. If I can help it, I prefer not to use religious words in my preaching. Mainly because they are so loaded. A particular word may mean dramatically different things for different people. It’s usually easier to use a different word.

So . . . how do we define *conversion*? It is the initial “*coming into relationship with God*”. People leave behind one way of life—whatever it was—for life in relationship with God.

We ourselves want to be such people—converted, I mean . . . and we want others to experience the same joys, the same fulfillment.

Some of the most widely emphasized ways to conversion—particularly the highly emotional and anti-intellectual ones—are objectionable to many.

You know, that stuff we see on the religious cable channels: a tel-evangelist in a \$3,000 suit, with an incredible head of hair . . . parading back and forth on the stage . . . weeping uncontrollably . . . entreating people to turn their lives over to Christ . . . while his slick,

professional choir sings a highly emotional song. And all the while, the electronic banner scrolls across our television set, telling us where to send our money.

However . . . as distasteful as that may be to some, we should not cause our objections to allow us to forget about the necessity of coming to faith, the first moment of which is conversion.

And on this subject of conversion, there may be a couple of different opinions in this very room.

I imagine that some of you may be thinking:

About time! We need to be hearing more about conversion than we do around here. This pulpit doesn't do its share of calling people into a saving relationship with God . . . at least in the old-fashioned straightforward way that used to get people down the aisles all the time! People everywhere around here are going to hell, and we're doing precious little about it!

If this is what you're thinking about, believe me, I understand. And while I may not agree with you fully—for a whole list of reasons—I urge you not to let go of your concern and zeal.

Others of you—further left on the continuum, I would guess—are a little nervous and maybe even a little embarrassed at too much talk of conversion. (We'll call you *Episcopalians*).

You have come to think of conversion and all aspects of relationship with God as intensely personal—almost too individualized for public discussion.

Even though at some point in your life you made a decision to reach out for some kind of a relationship with God and experienced *conversion*, talk of it—especially in public—well . . . that's not how we do it.

Another type of conversion is seen in the experience of the prison guard who was converted while Paul and Silas were in jail; his conversion seems to have been one of those emotion-charged experiences which some like to hold up as *the* model for conversion and which others want to steer clear of altogether.

The story: Paul and Silas had cast a demon out of a young girl and were charged with anti-Roman activity.

The officials pronounced the two missionaries guilty on the basis of the evidence presented, had them whipped severely, and then thrown into the Philippian prison.

The jailer put them into the "inner cell," which evidently was first century maximum security, and—in addition—*fastened their feet between heavy blocks of wood.*"

Did they cry and bemoan their fate? No, not these two. At midnight, they were still praying out loud and singing hymns.

Now, I've never been in jail so I can't tell you what I'd do under similar circumstances, but I have a feeling that I'd want to be as inconspicuous as possible. And while I'd be praying around the clock, I don't expect that I'd be praying aloud and certainly not singing hymns.

The writer of Acts tells us that as the two missionaries sang and prayed, the other prisoners listened.

In the middle of this Jimmy Swaggert-style revival meeting, there was a violent earthquake which, with whatever other damage it did, caused all the prison doors to fly open and caused the chains and the stockades to break loose too. Everybody was free!

Then, to me, the strangest possible exchange takes place. The jailer goes into the inner cell where Paul and Silas had remained, and asks them about conversion: *"What must I do to be saved?"* Are you kidding me!

This man was a Gentile, a pagan, without any knowledge of God. And in the course of a single evening—albeit a unique evening—he had come around to ask this pivotal question of life: *"What must I do to be saved?"*

And do you know what?

Paul and Silas didn't tell him to read through a tract with them.

Neither did they ask him to read the latest impressive volume by a leading scholar on the subject of salvation history.

They didn't ask him to make an appointment with a local pastor for consultation.

They didn't invite him to a church service where religious matters were supposed to have been taken care of.

They didn't ask him to confess all his failures.

They didn't ask him to memorize Bible verses or recite anybody's creed.

They didn't do anything except answer his question.

He asked: *"What must I do to be saved?"*, and they answered: *"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved—you and your family."*

The jailer took these missionary preachers home with him.

The jailer used some water to clean up the wounds of Paul and Silas from where they had been beaten, and then they turned around and used water to baptize the jailer and his family!

And as they ate together in the middle of the night, they were all filled with joy. **Conversion** had taken place that night!

So . . . let us agree that conversion can be a very dramatic and emotional event; there's nothing wrong with that so long as it is based in some kind of genuine, personal experience with God.

But it doesn't have to be either dramatic or emotional.

The essential point of this story is that anybody, any where . . . even during worship . . . can come to God and can claim God's love.

And . . . if conversion can happen even in worship, then we've got to keep on talking about it around here.

These are people who have heard us praying to God and singing of our Savior through our trials, and they want to know—if we'll give them a chance to ask: "*What must I do . . . ?*"

And in our own way of saying it and explaining out of our own journey of faith, we have to be ready and willing to say, "*You can be saved the same way we're all saved—by believing*".

What that news will do for you and what you make of it, I can't predict.

It's different for different people,

but I do know this,

it all starts with God.