

“ARE YOU SAVED?”

Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches

April 18, 2010

Acts 9:1-22

Recently I was asked to speak about Hospice and issues related to death and dying at a senior citizen’s luncheon in one of our local Baptist churches. Before I spoke, the Senior Adult minister welcomed people and started talking about the number of people who had joined their church this last Sunday and praised the Lord for the large number of conversions the church had logged on their roll that day. “We are just so blessed by those whose hearts were touched enough to make decisions for Christ,” this minister said so sincerely. Everything in me wanted to jump up and run away quickly as the flashbacks began of different people asking me at various times in my life, “Are you saved?” or “Do you **really** know the Lord?”

In my sermon preparations I ran across a wonderful story of missed salvation told by William Carter, the pastor of The First Presbyterian Church in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. “It’s a faint memory now but I remember a weeknight in early spring when I was seven or eight years old. Mr. and Mrs. Rising, a retired couple up the hill from us suddenly took an interest in my family and me. They hadn’t paid much attention to us before, but now they did and the reason became clear one afternoon, when Mrs. Rising called and invited us

to go to something called a revival. After a bit of hesitation, my mom agreed and circled the date on the kitchen calendar.

A few nights later the Risings came to pick us up. My dad said he couldn't go. 'Something came up,' he said, as he disappeared into the basement. Mom gave him a dirty look and then bundled up my sister and me, and we climbed into the Rising's Chrysler.

'Where are we going?' I asked. 'Well, Billy,' said Mr. Rising, 'we're going to get you saved.' I didn't know what that meant, but I had no choice but to go along for the ride.

We pulled up to a church in a nearby town and went in, just as the service was beginning. As I looked around the church, I began to realize that these people were not Presbyterians! For one thing, they were having a good time in church, singing and clapping and making a lot of noise; I wasn't used to all of that happening in church. And for another thing, the preacher talked in a funny way. As he spoke, he got louder and louder. He said some unusual things about being 'washed in the blood of the lamb.' I had never heard anybody say something like that and it sounded like a strange kind of bath.

Not only did the preacher say funny things, as soon as he was done shouting at us, he began to pray. His prayer was almost as long as his sermon and almost as loud. The preacher must have felt lonely up there, because he kept inviting people to come up front. In a young boy's whisper, I asked Mr. Rising, 'What are those people

doing?’ And Mr. Rising said, plain as day, ‘Those people are going up front and getting themselves saved.’

So right in the middle of that prayer, I opened my eyes and looked at the people who had gone up front. They didn’t look any different from the rest of us. None of them looked like they had gotten themselves in any trouble. And even though Mr. Rising said he had brought us to his church to get us saved, I didn’t feel like I needed to be saved from anything at the moment. As the prayer continued, I decided if Mr. Rising wasn’t going to push it, then I didn’t want to go up front and get myself saved. Soon we were all back in the Chrysler, speeding toward home, and I wondered briefly if I had missed my opportunity to ‘get myself saved.’ The next time the Risings invited us to their church, we didn’t go.”

When I shared this story to my husband, Kyle said the Mr. Risings he knew when he was growing up would not have let him back in the car if he had not gotten himself saved!

In the April 2001 edition of **Lectionary Homiletics**, I read that the question, “Are you saved?” is a relatively new question in terms of the Christian timeline. The question, “Are you saved?” can be dated to the middle of the nineteenth-century. It began being asked during the rise of revivalism in the 1830’s. During this time that was known as the Second Great Awakening, a lot of churches had grown sleepy and fiery evangelists tried their best to stir them awake. In their enthusiasm, they developed techniques to prompt people to commit

or recommit their lives to Jesus Christ and the Gospel and some of these techniques were and still are very manipulative. Like the preacher who wears down the congregation with a long-winded sermon and then keeps praying until someone finally comes forward to give their life to Christ. Or the evangelist who has the people singing 37 stanzas of 'Just As I Am,' and tells the buses to wait until one more person decides to follow Jesus.

I was amazed and relieved to find that these tiresome ploys to win converts to the Christian faith are relatively new innovations. The fact is that in the larger sweep of the church's history, Christians have not gone around harassing people and asking them, "Are you saved?"

The word "conversion" comes from the Latin for "to turn around," or to "move from one place to another." In the book, **Famous Conversions**, the editors, Hugh Kerr and John Mulder explain that while the word conversion does not appear in the Bible, certain synonyms such as repentance, regeneration, or being born again occur with great frequency throughout the scriptures. They said that the classic case of Christian conversion has always been the conversion of the apostle Paul. "The experience was dramatic, decisive, and determinative and Paul was never the same again."

In the April 11, 2001 edition of the **Christian Century**, Heidi Peterson, a Presbyterian pastor in Kansas City, writes this about Paul's conversion experience: "Saul was building his career on the

church. In his itinerant persecution of Christians he spared no effort to stifle the spread of the gospel. Saul was schooled by the Jewish Pharisees and driven to excel in his duty. He was a tireless worker who took the initiative and went far beyond the letter of his job description as a Pharisee. Even before he entered the city of Damascus he had drawn up papers for those he wanted to have murdered. In choosing Saul, God chose an intense personality bound to work overtime at whatever mission he undertook. Saul knew his mission, but God knew Saul. God knew that Saul was confident, in charge and not particularly curious about God. God knew that capturing Saul's attention required high drama."

After hearing about Saul's passion and personality, it is understandable that it took being struck blind by a great light and hearing the voice of Jesus asking, "Why do you persecute me?" before Saul was open to the love and grace of God in his life. I do not mean to discount the conversion experience of Paul or any one else who experiences a sudden and dramatic conversion that can take hold and work wonders in someone's life. I do mean to say that sudden, dramatic conversions are only one way in which God comes to us and allows faith to find expression in the living of our days.

I believe that God comes to us in ways that fit our unique personalities, the time and culture we live in, as well the personal passions and needs that make us who we are. Some people who have quieter personalities and different needs and passions than Saul had, probably come to know God by different ways because it is not

as difficult for God to get their attention. For example, those Christians who are baptized as infants and gradually grow into the faith they have been taught to love and respect most likely have less dramatic conversion experiences to share and tend to view their salvation as a lifelong process rather than a one time event.

In our New Testament lesson for today within the story of Paul's conversion there is another such model of the converted life that I have never before heard anything about. In the same Christian Century article entitled, "Saving Saul," Rev. Heidi Peterson writes, "Ananias was also a convert to the faith and a person who lived very close to God. His relationship with God was intimate and conversational. Unlike Saul, Ananias had been growing in the knowledge of God over time, and when the Lord called his name he didn't need to ask, 'Who are you?' God's voice was a familiar one, and he responded as might an obedient child who is being called by a parent from another room, 'Here I am.' Unlike Saul, Ananias was not struck speechless, sightless, and appetite-less. He talked back because being in dialogue with God was not something new to Ananias. He was practiced at it. When Saul spoke with Jesus, the power of the experience immobilized him within the darkness of his own being for three days. Not Ananias. Ananias got up, went to the house of Judas and delivered the message that God had entrusted to him.

Ananias's relationship with God clearly illustrates the point that the lasting mark of conversion is not one date circled in red on the

calendar, but rather the lasting mark of conversion is the whole story of one's life. In the end, Saul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus is worth telling only because of what he did afterwards."

Perhaps the one thing we can all affirm is that salvation has much less to do with our human attempts to manufacture faith or provoke somebody's commitment, and much more to do with God's faithful activity among us. In the wonderfully refreshing book, **Amazing Grace**, Kathleen Norris writes, "in living out my conversion as a daily and lifelong process, I treasure most the example of my maternal grandmother who lived in one marriage, one home, one church congregation for over sixty years. Grandmother Totten's religious life was far less dramatic than that of my Grandmother Norris, who could name the date and time when she was saved. Because Grandmother Totten's vocabulary of faith was much more subtle than Grandmother Norris, I was slow to grasp its significance as conversion. I suspect that if Grandmother Totten had ever been asked to name the date and time of her conversion, she would have given one of her quick, high-pitched laughs, and said, 'But I've always been a Christian.'

My Grandmother Totten was raised from infancy on the biblical stories, in a family that recited, read, and prayed over the Bible so much that she came to know much of it by heart. And maybe that's the point, to know by heart, to incarnate a religion in one's bones. Her faith was alive for anyone to see and her life demonstrated that conversion is no more spectacular than learning to love the people

we live with, go to school with, and work among. It does not mean seeking out the most exotic spiritual experience, or the ideal religion, or the holiest of teachers who will give us the greatest return on our investment. Conversion is more about seeing ourselves and the ordinary people in our lives in a new light. Can it be that these very people, even the difficult and unbearable ones, are the ones God has given to us, so that together we might find salvation?”

I have worked with the sick and the dying for many years now and this work continues to bring great meaning to my life and continued salvation to my soul. I truly love my work with the sick and the dying because I have found that the view these people have from the edge of life is often more accurate than the way people of health see reality. It has been my experience that the sick and the dying have a much clearer focus on what truly matters in the living of our days and tend to knit-pick less about the things that really don't matter at all.

In the profound book that many of us have been reading, **My Grandfather's Blessing**, Dr. Rachel Remen echoes some of my sentiments. She says, “When life is stripped down to its very essentials, it is surprising how simple things become. Fewer and fewer things matter and those that matter, matter a great deal more. As a doctor to people with cancer, I have walked the beach at the edge of life picking up this wisdom like shells. One of my patients survived three major surgeries in five weeks and afterwards described himself as ‘born again.’ When I asked him about this, he

told me that his experience had challenged all of his ideas about life and faith. Everything he had thought true had turned out to be merely belief and had not withstood the terrible events of recent weeks. He said he was stripped of all that he knew and left only with the unshakable conviction that life itself was holy. This insight in its singularity and simplicity had sustained him better than the multiple, complex system of beliefs and values that had been the foundation of his life and faith up until this time. The holiness of life upheld him like a stone and upholds him still because it has been tested by fire.”

I believe that in the depths of our most terrifying vulnerabilities we know the sacred, holiness of life and we discover that we live not by choice but by grace. It is there that we affirm life itself is truly blessing and gift to all of us who live most of our days with the illusion that we are in total control.

Are you saved? Am I saved? Are we continuing to be saved? Yes and Yes and Yes. According to the New Testament, we are in luck because salvation comes looking for us, not because we are good or faithful or deserving but because God is good and faithful and most gracious. Let us be filled with peace and gratitude that the Holy One continues to awaken faith in us and that every now and then, we receive glimpses of healing, grace, love, life, meaning and greater wholeness beyond anything we could ever get for ourselves. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Gracious and Loving God, we gather in this place each Sunday to worship You and to give witness to the grace that continues to create us and sustain us. We are thankful for the knowledge that salvation is a lifelong process and has less to do with our human attempts to manufacture faith or provoke somebody's commitment, and much more to do with God's activity among us. We are humbled by the reminder that the lasting mark of conversion is not one date circled in red on the calendar, but the whole story of our life. We are forever grateful that salvation is always seeking us out and comes to us not because we are good or faithful or deserving but because God is good and faithful and most gracious.

We pray on this day that You would be with our friends and loved ones who are experiencing illness, grief or depression. Help them and us to see that it should not be in our faith or limited vision or secure world that we trust to live by each day. We often forget that life is so very short and precious and fragile and that we would do far better to allow the faith and graciousness of God to inform our living and our relating each day. May the bread and the juice we drink today from our Lord's Table remind us this week of the things that truly nourish our souls. May this sacrament give us the perspective and courage we need to live Christ's mandate of love and to more fully devote ourselves to his mission of bringing God's kingdom to our unfinished world and incomplete selves. In the name of the One who showed us how to live and to love, we pray, Amen.