

“Peter’s Conversion” - The Rev. Jennifer L. Adams
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Most of you probably know the story about the conversion of St Paul. It’s a story that is held as foundational in Christian tradition as an example of how God interrupts life and turns hearts and changes the church as a result of individuals who themselves are changed. While that wasn’t a reading for today, I want you to have it in mind too as we go along. The story goes like this: One day, Saul was walking on the road to Damascus when a great light from heaven suddenly shone on him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ because Saul had been a violent and zealous persecutor of Christians. Then the voice continued and told Saul, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.’ And when Saul asked the voice what he should do the voice replied, ‘Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.’ Saul, was blind for a short time but with some help got himself to Damascus, was baptized and through that whole experience was transformed from a vicious persecutor of Christians to “Paul, apostle to endless numbers of Christians and their communities of faith.” And that tends to be how we think of conversion. But today we get a different sort of conversion story, it’s what happened to Peter and it’s not a story that is told quite as often or held quite as centrally as the story of Paul. But I believe it’s the kind of story that should be told and needs to be told because, this conversion story tells us not about people outside of the faith being converted to become those within the faith; instead it tells us about someone within the faith being converted in order to open the doors to those on the outside.

Peter was as faithful as they come and that’s an important part of this story. He was the rock whom Jesus commanded to “Feed my sheep.” And as unpredictable as Peter had been right up through the crucifixion, we hear in the Book of Acts, that he hadn’t missed a beat from resurrection on. Unlike Saul as vicious persecutor, *obviously* needed a conversion experience, Peter was the model Christian. He was the leading disciple who passionately kept to religious law. Peter could have been the poster boy for the new movement that was the Church, preaching and healing and feeding and moving from town to town spreading the good word about resurrection and baptizing people into the faith.

But then it happened to him too when nobody even knew he needed it. A vision happened to him and the immediacy of that method (vision) tells me that God really needed to change the hearts of both of these guys. Now Peter’s vision came to him when he was in Joppa, and we know from last week’s reading that in Joppa Peter had brought a woman back to life. And after that miracle stayed in Joppa a few days and Acts tells us that, “many believed.” Now you’d think that after having done that kind of work, after having performed that kind of miracle, the vision would have been one that was filled with affirmation or praise, something like a divine, confirming pat on the back that Peter could have then communicated back to the disciples. “A

God is on our side” sort of message to proclaim to the growing masses. But instead God came to Peter in this vision and told Peter that he needed to change too; it wasn’t just the Saul’s of the world that needed to take a holy turn; in this vision God told Peter, who was as Christian as he could possibly be that he needed to open his eyes and open his heart because God wanted to open the Church.

To Gentiles. And there is no way to possibly communicate to you how big a deal that was. Other than to compare it to what we are living through today on some levels with gays and lesbians and what we have lived through before with women and what we have lived through before with people of color and slaves and unfortunately there have been so many before that I can’t include them all this morning. And believe it or not, the inclusion of Gentiles may actually have been bigger than any of those movements, the Gentiles were the “other” of all others. They were unclean. Unfaithful. Un-chosen. Gentiles were completely un – -religious-law abiding. They were the “uns” with a capital “U”. And get this (because it’s important): while the move to include “Gentiles” obviously went against tradition, it also went against the scriptures that were Peter’s holy scriptures and the holy scriptures of the disciples and the scriptures of the most faithful of the day. (Remember that Leviticus was around then too.) With this vision, God was doing something huge, and I can’t over-communicate what a big deal it was. In this vision, God was breaking with tradition and going against certain verses of holy scripture, in order to open the church to those previously deemed unworthy of the faith.

Which should tell us that God does things like that. There is precedence, Biblical precedence for opening our doors wider and wider to all those who hunger. This piece of the Book of Acts tells us conversion is not always about people outside of the faith becoming those within the faith; sometimes it’s those within the faith who need to turn (or be turned) in order to welcome those on the outside.

We can even go one step further with this: since this particular story of Peter happened so early in the life of the church, it could be that the process itself, the process of breaking open and including the “other” might actually be part of what it means to be church. We feed, we heal, we forgive, and we open ourselves or are opened by God to the other.

“The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us,” Peter said. What a beautiful way to put it. “The Spirit told me,” Peter said, “not to make a distinction between them and us.” And then he went on, with the wisdom and humility born of visions, “If . . . God gave them the same gift that he gave us . . . who was I that I could hinder God?”

And that’s the question of the day, maybe of every day this side of heaven. Who are we to hinder God? Who are we to get in the way of anyone who is thirsty and seeks hope? Who are we to get in the way of anyone whose gifts and ministries can help build, expand and strengthen the church? There was God leading the way, in the very beginnings challenging the use of

Scripture and opening the church to those previously deemed unclean, un-holy, unworthy. Because those kinds of conversions happen too. And maybe they are part of what it takes to help us be the kind of disciples that truly know what it means to love one another. Conversions within.

After all, there was God shifting even the Rock into new understandings of the faith. And who was he, who are we, who is anyone to hinder God?