

SERMON: ARE YOU CONVERTED?
ROMANS 5:1-11

Repent and be converted! (Are you converted? Let's talk about religious conversion this morning.)

Now there are good reasons for our dislike of the word CONVERSION. We have had those experiences of devout persons who pounce upon us at work or ring our doorbell, aggressively asking, "Are you converted?"

I appreciate their zeal, but this is not the manner and method of the New Testament. Jesus went through the villages and town of Galilee proclaiming the Good News, crying out, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Not, "Are you converted?"

Did you know that the very first of Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses is about conversion? It states that the Christian life must be a daily repentance, a daily conversion.

One who does not know what conversion is, does not fully know the meaning of faith, forgiveness or Jesus Christ. So, what then is conversion?

It is an about-face. Something as astonishing as if the water of the Tennessee River should suddenly start flowing upstream instead of downstream. Conversion is a complete turnaround.

The inclination of our hearts is to seek and serve ourselves. We sit like the spider in the center of our webs, we are the center of our little worlds. Everyone and everything should be spinning around us. We look out at the world from the center of our webs.

We want what others have, their happiness, their possessions, their prestige, their power. But we also want their love, their respect, their time and their sympathy.

We sit like a king on a throne. My spouse, my children, my school, my employer, and yes, even my dear God are all there to serve me. I am the Lord, my God.

If you believe that I'm making too harsh a judgement, speak for yourself. I confess that I am such a person.

Something can happen. The water of a river does not flow uphill. But, it can, it does happen, that this natural inclination of the human heart to say, "Me, me, me" can be reversed, and instead, it says, "You, God, You."

This is the great miracle, the miracle that we designate with the word conversion. Conversion is simply this, that one no longer sits, like the spider, in the middle of its web or like the king upon his throne, demanding obedient service.

Instead of living for ourselves, we live for others. Instead of ruling, we serve. Instead of demanding, we give.

There was One who could say of himself, "I have not come to be ministered unto, but to minister." (Matthew 20:28) It was the decisive event in all of human history: Jesus Christ giving His life as a ransom for us, shedding His blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Through Him, it is possible for the first time that this so new and totally different spirit of conversion becomes effective in us. Through Christ, God becomes the center about which everything revolves. God is the sole legitimate king of our lives. God ascends the throne and we step down. When God becomes center, the king, instead of saying “Me, me, me,” we say “You, You, You, are my God and King. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the way to eternal life. You alone, Lord. You, alone.”

This, then, is conversion. That we seek God first.

Paul was converted to be a witness for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He set out originally to put an end to the emerging Jesus movement. His job was to persecute the followers of Christ, known then as the people of The Way.

You remember how on the road to Damascus in the 30s of the first century, the resurrected Christ appeared before him in a very dramatic conversion experience? Christ asked, “Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Paul’s response was amazing. He not only stopped persecuting the followers of Jesus, but he changed his whole life to reflect the teachings of Jesus. He made a career, his life mission, to share those teachings with as many people as he could as he established congregations throughout the beginning of the early church. God’s grace, mercy and love were so deep that it reached him, even him, so that a persecutor and destroyer of the church became a builder of the church.

All of us are called to conversion, to a change of heart. It doesn’t have to be dramatic like Paul, but it does involve recognizing our own sins and seeking to be forgiven and made new.

We die and rise daily. Conversion is a daily experience, it’s not a one and done kind of thing. No, it is ongoing throughout our lives as we try to align ourselves with God. Again, the very first of the Ninety-five Theses reminds us that the Christian life is a daily conversion.

So, you are converted. But are you born again? If I’m converted, do I have to be born again?

For some Christians, being born again means making a decision to follow Christ. It is often a dramatic decision and usually comes with some spiritual emotion.

Are Lutherans born again? We admit we are born sinful and in need of a Savior. We Lutherans say we are born again at our baptisms. In the waters of baptism, we are adopted into God’s family and we receive the Holy Spirit. Born again through baptism.

That’s some mighty highfalutin theology that goes on at the baptismal font there at the entry of our sanctuary. We’re not just splashing water back there, having bath time. At baptism, you receive the Spirit of God and are adopted by God.

That’s why we give out a candle whenever someone is baptized. To remind them that their baptismal day is their spiritual birthday. Through baptism, they are born again.

And just as conversion is a daily ongoing activity, so is being born again. Our old self dies and our new self-rises, daily. Every time we return to God, we are returning to our baptism.

We are being converted; we are being born again. Again, and again and again.