

1 Sermon, September 4, 2011

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 20:24-29, Romans 12:1-3

Title: "Finding Christ at the Center: Conversion, a New Heart"

1. Conversion – not what you imagine
2. New Birth - Thomas
3. Imagine Christians in AD 500
4. Metanoia – a change of mind
5. Humility

1. Conversion – not what you imagine

Conversion.

What's the image you have of conversion?

Do you have an image of someone in deepest Africa, who had believed in shamanism and witchcraft, and now claims Jesus as his savior?

Or maybe you have an image of a man in his 50s, who tells about his terrible younger years of drinking and swearing and worse, but since he met Jesus, he's a changed man.

Or maybe your image of conversion is a negative one, because you've seen recent converts who were aggressive in trying to get you to believe like them. You might have the image of conversion making someone more judgmental, saying "I'm going to heaven, and you aren't."

Or maybe you think of how, historically, many conversions were made at the point of a sword. Whether it was by Saint Olaf who forced Christianity on Norway, or Aurangzeb, who forcibly converted many in India to Islam, or the Romans who forced their religious system of emperor-worship on conquered peoples – religion was often spread by conquest.

The thing that these images of conversion have in common is that they are events – outer changes from one thing to another. We have no idea how much the inner spirit might be changed.

Besides that, the implication is that the conversion – the change – is over. It's complete.

And that's just plain wrong.

True conversion is not only an event, it's a process following the event. And true conversion is something that has to happen on the inside. The quality of our inner life has to be changed.

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2. New Birth - Thomas

John Wesley, in his sermon titled "The New Birth," said:

... what is the nature of the new birth? It is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is "created anew in Christ Jesus;" when it is "renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness;" when the love of the world is changed into the love of God; pride into humility; passion into meekness; hatred, envy, malice, into a sincere, tender, disinterested love for all mankind. In a word, it is that change whereby the earthly, sensual, devilish mind is turned into the "mind which was in Christ Jesus."

John Wesley spoke of conversion as the beginning of sanctification, the entrance into a process where "we are gradually to "grow up in Him who is our Head."

Maybe the best example of that sort of Conversion in the New Testament is the witness of the apostle Thomas.

He is told about Jesus rising from the dead, and how he appeared to the rest of them when Thomas was not there. But Thomas, desiring to believe, can't quite put his head around this idea.

And then Jesus appears to Thomas. Jesus came just for him, it seems. And the doubt Thomas had just melts away into joy and wonder. It was a process for Thomas, and had undoubtedly started back when he was listening to Jesus teach. The process went through the suffering, death, and resurrection and came out again stronger than ever.

3. Imagine Christians in AD 500

That is the ancient understanding of conversion, as it has been practiced in the orthodox churches since at least the third century AD.

Imagine, if you will, a couple, Anna and Theodore, who lived in what we now call Syria about AD 500. They have been Christians all their lives. Their faith is at the center of their lives, and they expect to grow in their faith day by day.

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Over and over on Sundays, Anna hears the phrase "in Christ," which St. Paul uses 89 times in the New Testament. This phrase is central to her understanding of her faith. If she is "in Christ," there is no separation between her and Christ, and she can become more like him.

She and Theodore understand that the Christian life is about being permeated and filled with the presence of God. They know the Greek word for this, Theosis, which means being re-modeled after the image of God.

For Anna and Theodore, conversion is not about outward change, although they expect that will happen as a result of the inner change. Conversion is instead about the day-to-day living that submerges our will under the will of God. It is living so that a temptation to brag is a lesson in humility, so that a temptation to anger is a lesson in self-control. In each circumstance of life, there is something to learn.

Theodore, who has a special temptation toward jealousy, has weekly conversations with Father Isaac, who has himself wrestled with jealousy and found it possible to overcome.

Anna, who is intimidated by her mother-in-law Irene, finds it very hard to go to dinner there on Saturday nights. To Anna, her children are generally well-behaved, but it seems like their flaws are especially evident at their grandmother's house. Anna is always on the edge of embarrassment, feeling that her parenting is not good enough.

So, whenever Anna visits her mother-in-law's house, it is a spiritual learning experience. She has to overcome the temptation to self-doubt and a vague sense of guilt for not measuring up. She has to trust in Christ in whom she is acceptable and capable.

Her mother-in-law, Irene, has a similar spiritual struggle. She has never criticized her daughter-in-law, but there have been times when she was on the verge of doing so. Anna just doesn't keep house the way that Irene was taught a wife should. And she is just a bit too lenient with her children. Irene has to pray hard before her daughter-in-law and grandchildren come over, so that she won't say things that should not be said.

For both of these women, their faith is something they have to discipline themselves to do. They compare it, as St. Paul did, to the practice of an athlete in preparing to run a race.

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4. Metanoia – a change of mind

Those in the ancient church understood what Paul said in Romans 12:

...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The greek word about being transformed by the renewing of your minds is metanoia, literally “beyond the mind,” which is a transformation of the mind where greater clarity and insight are obtained.

This metanoia is a process of transformation where the restlessness of the inner spirit is tamed and brought under the supervision of the love of God.

Through metanoia, you can discern what God wants, because your restless will has slowed down enough to more fully understand the things of God.

Jeremiah 31, written hundreds of years prior to St. Paul, spoke of the same thing, saying to the people of Judah that God would write a covenant on their hearts. Not some outer agreement, but an inner relationship of mystery and wonder.

5. Humility

Our fictional couple, Anna & Theodore, would have known what this meant. They would have felt that their hearts were *supposed* to be transformed. They saw the temptation of the evil one as the thing to be overcome by being “in Christ.”

And if there was one thing that spoke of this transformation of the heart, it was humility. If you could, as St. Paul said, “Count others as better than yourself,” then you were making progress. If you were able, as Jesus said, to love your neighbor as yourself all the while dying to self, you were on the way.

And one of the practices that Theodore and Anna would have understood as helping them in their union with Christ is what we’re about to celebrate: Holy Communion.

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As you partake in Holy Communion today, may you be humbled, and may you in some measure be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Amen.

"The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Jeremiah 31:31-34, NRSV.

"But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" John 20:24-28, NRSV.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Romans 12:1-3, NRSV.

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Instead of thinking of conversion as a switch
In reality, it's more like unclogging a sewer pipe, and you can begin to
get rid of some of the garbage that's been building up.