**The Conversion of St. Paul’s**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

for Annual Meeting Sunday, January 28, 2017

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, MA

Every year, towards the end of January, our church calendar commemorates a Feast called The Conversion of St. Paul. This year, it happened last Wednesday. Most commemorations in the Episcopal Church Calendar don’t honor specific moments in the lives of the saints – they just honor his or her entire life.

But Paul is different. Unlike most of the ancient saints, about whom we know very little, we know a lot about the Apostle Paul. Or, at least, we know a lot about the Biblical character Paul, which isn’t exactly the same thing. Paul gets a lot of airtime in many different books of the New Testament. Of course, there are his letters, from which we read many Sundays. There are the ones he actually wrote, the ones other people actually wrote and signed his name to so they’d have more authority, and the ones we’re not quite sure about.

But even more than the letters, we learn about the events of St. Paul’s life mostly from the Acts of the Apostles. Though written nearly 50 years later than Paul’s letters, around the year 100, the Book of Acts is a sequel, written by the author of Luke’s Gospel and picking up right where the Gospel ended with the formation of the first generation of Jesus’ followers after his ascension into Heaven. It reads a bit like a soap opera, and Paul is one of its main protagonists. It’s from this book that we learn of Paul’s many journeys and adventures around the ancient Mediterranean basin. It is from this book that we are told of Paul’s imprisonment, his struggles to unite Jewish and Gentile Christians, and most of all, the dramatic story of his conversion on the road to Damascus.

It is the particular moment of his Conversion that is singled out for commemoration each January. You may recall that Paul was actually born with the name Saul. Saul was a devout Jew, who made it his business to persecute groups of other Jews who had decided to worship Jesus as the Messiah. Saul had a reputation for harassing, arresting and punishing these early followers of Jesus – and being really good at it. But then, one day, as he is walking on the road to Damascus, he sees a flash of lightening and hears the voice of Jesus calling to him, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?”. He is struck blind and wanders around for three days until God sends one of those early Jesus followers, Ananias, to go to him and restore his sight. When the sight is restored, like scales falling from his eyes, he has seen the light and been converted. His life is transformed – not with special powers or magical abilities – but with new purpose and direction. No longer will he persecute those who follow the way of Jesus, now he will support them, equip them, and increase their number in places near and far.

Conversion can be a tricky word, especially for us Episcopalians. It makes some of us a little squeamish. It triggers thoughts of judgmentalism and coercion, and frankly, that’s understandable given the way these two elements have been linked to religious conversion in various times and places throughout history. Even Paul’s own conversion story contains some elements of each of these dynamics. But if we can accept that there are other ways to experience conversion – ways that frame change not as a rejection of an evil past and an embrace of a perfect future, ways that might be more gradual, ways that might continue throughout one’s life – then I think the language can be constructive for us as people of faith.

Consider the etymology of the word itself. Conversion actually shares the same Latin root as the word conversation, the root of which connotes neither coercion nor judgmentalism. It simply means to turn around. This is what we do in conversation. We turn things around, specifically, we turn ideas around. And then we talk about them some more and turn them around again. And again. And then maybe we stop and have tea. And then back at it again. Conversing back and forth. Trying on new ideas. Keeping some, discarding others. And as we converse, eventually, our values and convictions can evolve and change, and we are now different in what we believe than we were before. We have not entirely abandoned our sense of who we used to be, nor have we become exactly like our conversation partners, but we have changed. Conversation has led to conversion.

This is how I would describe my own conversion to a sense of faith as an adult Christian. It was a gradual process involving many conversation partners. I found that trying out the practices of faith – going to church, early attempts at prayer, reading the Bible, etc. – preceeded my own sense of having “become” a Christian. And to be honest, my own conversion process is ongoing. I don’t believe in God in the same way as I did fifteen years ago. And I expect, even hope, that in fifteen years, I’ll be again in a different place. It probably won’t involve flashes of light or periods of blindness – but it may well involve occasional times of disorientation, uncertainty or confusion – which are all natural parts of any process of change.

Our beloved church, all of us together, is also in a constant process of conversion. So it seems fitting that the Conversion of Paul falls near to our annual parish meeting each year. Annual meeting Sunday each year is our time to reflect together on our ongoing conversion as a parish. That’s why, starting last year and continuing this year, a good chunk of the meeting will not simply involve hearing reports and thumbing through spreadsheets.  Rather, the most important part of our meeting will be structured conversations you will have with each other in small groups about the life of St. Paul’s. The hope is that as we converse with ourselves, those conversations will lead to conversions in our collective thinking about who we are, what gifts we have to offer, and how God is calling us to move forward in our shared ministry as a church.

As I look back on the past five and a half years as your rector, I’m struck by the ways we have already been converted as a community of faith in that time.  Some things about us are still the same: we still find our greatest joy in our relationships with God and with each other; we still proclaim a simple understanding of faith: that God is love, that God loves us and the whole world, and that God yearns for us all to love each other more fully; we still can’t figure out how to get the motion sensor lights in the back classroom not to stay on all night.

And a lot about who we are as a parish has changed, too.  We have grown significantly in the past six years, about 30% or so.  We have established several new ministry opportunities in the parish, and involved a greater number of people in some kind of ministry leadership.  We have discovered how meaningful mission trips can be, both for us and the organizations with whom we partner in Appalachia and in Haiti.  We have learned how to live together as a parish where some of our ministry involves the whole parish coming together, and other ministries involve groups of people who share particular passions.  We have seen not just a complete turn over in our parish staff, but a structural change in having a second priest serving among us.  We have given necessary attention to our physical plant so that it can continue to serve as both our spiritual home and a resource to the wider community.

Our conversion into being this kind of parish wasn’t just a random occurrence.  It was something that you as a whole parish dreamed of, and then discerned, prioritized, planned for, and executed – work that began back in 2008 nearly a decade ago the last time we initiated a strategic planning process.  As we think about where we are as a church in the cycle of change, I believe we are ready to begin another time of visioning about how God might be inviting us into the next phase of our own conversion.  What dreams do we have for who we long to become as we continue to share this parish together?  What resources and gifts and talents and passions has God brought among us?  What relationships might God be calling us into next?  How might we know and share God’s love more fully?

Today’s annual meeting is just the beginning of what I hope will be a robust, year-long conversation with each other about our vision for our shared future in the coming years.  I look forward to working with the vestry in the coming months to plan for ways to develop this conversation as a whole parish, and then to engaging in it with all of you.

It’s no secret that entering into times of visioning can feel a bit uneasy. Change, even just thinking about it, can be unsettling. It often feels like there is a time of confusion (like Paul in his blindness) before vision is regained. As one of you put it to me this week, “going from ‘being’ to ‘becoming’ is a move into uncertainty, and that can create some anxiety.” What we know is that the more broad the conversation, the more inclusive and inviting and methodical the process of discernment, the more we’ll be able to trust that God’s abides in the shared vision that emerges.

We are only at the very beginning, the start of planning to plan, as people in this business say. But I already know that each of your voices will be critical to the conversation, because each of you have a unique and valuable understanding of God and God’s dreams for us as a church.  With all of us together, we can begin the process of conversing and converting and conversing and converting until we arrive at an articulation of how Christ is leading us onward together.  Amen.