

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 11, 2022

“Let’s talk about Paul”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. I do want to take a moment to remember that today is also 9/11 and lift up those who continue to struggle from that loss.

Glad to see everyone here, we made it through a very hot week. Speaking of hot, today we have readings of a rather “hot topic”: sin and salvation. This morning I would like to discuss our Epistle because it holds some history that we often glide over when we read these letters. I think we do ourselves a disservice if we don’t read our Biblical offerings within their frame of context. So today, let’s talk about Paul.

Originally from Tarsus in Asia Minor, Saul (who after his conversion became Paul) received some of his education “at the feet of Gamaliel”, a highly respected rabbi in Jerusalem. Saul then joined the Pharisaic movement and vigorously set out to defend his ancestral traditions by persecuting those just forming the early Church. On the way to Damascus where he wanted to arrest those who were Jesus-followers or those “who belonged to the Way”, he had a vision of Jesus Christ that changed his life and turned him into the apostle to the gentiles. This experience is interpreted now in today’s text by Paul as an act of God’s mercy.

For the author of First Timothy, personal experience trumps doctrine and theory, especially when it comes to grace and salvation. The Saul before this experience was “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence” who had even assisted in, and approved of, the execution of the first recognized deacon of the new community, Stephen, as written in Acts chapter 7.

The post-conversion Paul, by contrast, is depicted as somebody who rejected not only violence but also impressive rhetoric, trusting instead to be empowered and strengthened by Christ for his ministry. The possible misunderstanding of this “conversion” event would be to think of it as an act of turning away from one religion in order to adhere to a different one.

We need to remember that Judaism and Christianity were not yet distinct religions at that time. In fact, Christianity did not exist in the first half of the first century CE. The “conversion” of Paul, then, occurred within Judaism, namely from the Pharisaic to the Messianic-Christian movement. A closer reading of our text yields the insight that Paul’s “conversion” pertained in particular to the question of how to live out one’s faith in God.

We know that Paul was not perfect, as he time and again admits he is in his own struggle between body, mind, and will as he tries to live a life that is instructional to those establishing new church communities. Whether you can connect with his writings is often a personal matter, but his conversion leads us to ask the question, have we had a conversion experience? Have we experienced change? Have we gone from violent and angry to more accepting and merciful?

Now I know that Episcopalians do not come up to an altar call, or shout "Praise Jesus" while dancing in the aisles. And I do admit that some of those kinds of services are a boost to the soul. But all Christians when grasping the teachings of Jesus (yes, even the frozen chosen in the pews) must experience change if they understand the Gospel at all.

One may not fall to the ground and see Jesus face to face, or have a near-death experience to have a conversion toward Christ. In fact, there are many ways to change one's life. Some conversions are personal, deep, and take a long time to notice results; while others are loud and proud changes that everyone can see. Neither one is wrong or right. Either way, once we understand the Gospel, we are expected to change.

Whether you are living a Johnny Cash conversion, or a gentle life of service such as the past Queen Elizabeth, one's faith and spirituality should have created a profound change. The more you understand the love and mercy available to you, the more you realize you also have love and mercy available to others.

Jesus tells us today that there is no shame in having been lost. There is no shame in making a mistake because once admitted, mercy is available. Everyone of God's children is worthy of love, and everyone of God's children will have a period of being lost to their true path. But the Holy Spirit will forever bring us opportunities to come home. Jesus will always try to find us, whether it is through a bumper sticker that speaks to your soul, or the right timing in an emergency, God is always there - a prayer away.

If you notice - in all three of today's readings God had reason to judge humanity: the Israelites making a golden calf to worship, Saul before his conversion, or those who judged others unworthy of spending time with Jesus. Yet there is God's mercy in all the situations presented.

Sin and salvation, judgment and mercy, grace and thanksgiving, are all part of human life. We are called to acknowledge, learn, repent and then change when we are lost. But we are also promised mercy, grace and often new opportunities.

I suggest you take time this week to remember your own conversion. When did you first feel the love of God in your life? When did you offer grace, mercy or thanksgiving, in a new way? What is it about being Christian? Episcopalian? The Gospel? That makes a difference in your life? When have you been lost? When have you been found?

"For that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." Amen