

"THE REBIRTH OF A MAN"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Earlier this week...on Thursday, the 25th...the Christian Church celebrated a remarkable event that took place almost two thousand years ago. The event I am referring to was the conversion of St. Paul. We do not celebrate this event in the United Methodist Church the way that some other branches of the Christian Church do and perhaps we ought to make more of it than we do for historically we have always believed in conversion.

To me, it's interesting to note in passing that on the 25th of December we celebrate the birth of a Child and that on the 25th of January we celebrate the rebirth of a man. This is a good Sunday to review the story of Paul's life and let some of the rich meaning of that amazing life spill over into our lives.

DEVELOPMENT

I was telling the members of this year's Confirmation Class a Sunday or two ago that nearly one-half of the New Testament is devoted to the life and the letters of St. Paul. This sizeable section of the Scriptures provides us with various treasures. For instance, if you're looking for one of the most exciting biographies in history, here it is. Or, if you're looking for a travelogue with insights into the world of the First Century, you'll find it here. If you're looking for a "classic account" of one person's journey in the Faith, it's here. Outside of our Lord, Himself, there is no person in the Bible about whom we know as much, or whose influence has been as great as this fearless figure of the Faith whom God used to give width to the hearing of the "Good News" and depth to its meaning.

HIS LIFE

Seldom do we think of Paul as a contemporary of Jesus, but it's quite evident that their lives overlapped. Just about the time that Jesus journeyed with His parents to Jerusalem's Temple at the age of 12, a baby boy was being dedicated by his parents in a synagogue in Tarsus, a town in Asia Minor, about 300 miles or so north of Jerusalem. The name of this younger boy was Saul...after the first king of Israel. Saul. In some respects, Jesus and Saul followed similar paths. Each was brought up by God-fearing Jewish parents. Each was faithful in his attendance at the local synagogue. Each learned a trade. But there came a point where their paths separated and this is significant to note. Jesus went on to emphasize a man's response to the LOVE of God. Saul (or Paul as he was later to be called) went on to emphasize a man's response to the LAWS of God and of man.

Now, whether or not Saul ever saw Jesus, we do not know. It is possible that Saul was in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, for loyal Jews always made the pilgrimage up to the Holy City at Passover time. While there is no indication that Saul witnessed the proceedings of that first Holy Week, there is a good possibility that he heard about them and in one of the lodging places of Jerusalem on that first Good Friday evening, it's entirely possible that Saul and some of his young friends gathered to celebrate the defeat and the death of that "foolish" Nazarene who had dared to suggest that God just might be interested in something more than outward observance of the precious Law.

However that may have been, we're on more solid ground historically when we place Saul in Jerusalem several weeks later. By that time he had left his home in Tarsus to study in Jerusalem with the respected teacher, Gamaliel. And

like many other young people, intoxicated with independence, he was an extremist with very little patience or tolerance for those whose views did not coincide with his own. And in particular, he was really irked and turned off by the persistence of the followers of this man from Nazareth recently put to death. Why...the colossal nerve of these people...pitting themselves against the power of the Church and the State. He would do what he could do to help stamp them out and rid the earth of their presence!

And so he was there that day when a young man named Stephen who belonged to this small group of followers was dragged before the Sanhedrin on some false charge and condemned to death. Stephen spoke in clear, "trumpet tones" in defense of his Christian Faith. What he said and the manner in which he said and did this infuriated the mob and what followed was a First Century, "first class" lynching. The Biblical record says that Paul stood by...a sort of check room attendant for the garments of those who stoned to death this young man, Stephen. No protest on Paul's part as he witnessed the death of the first Christian martyr, a young man named Stephen.

The only thing was that Stephen died in rather heroic fashion. Something about his face and his manner that left one with the impression that he was the "conqueror" rather than the "conquered". Saul never could forget that scene. And moreover, he later admitted that at that time he was a walking "civil war". The more he tried to pull himself up by the laws of righteousness, the more frustrated he was over his failures. But he tried to ignore it and directed his time and energy to pursuing and persecuting the early Christians in and around Jerusalem and then one day he signed up to go to Damascus...for some Gestapo service....vowing to capture any Christians he could find there in that city and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment and death.

ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Know, if you know your New Testament, you know what happened. That road up to Damascus was to become famous for quite another experience than that which Saul had in mind.

A LIGHT. A VOICE. A complete change of direction. The Paul of later years spoke of that experience with a note of reverence and deep wonder. "He appeared to me" he was to say. Words have their limitation in describing just what happened.....but the decisive reality of that Damascus Road experience is beyond any doubt. For it was then that Saul became Paul. It was then that this fiery foe of the Christians turned about face and was set on his way to become the foremost person of the Christian movement in its early years.

In the years that immediately followed, Paul slowly built a reputation as an able exponent and example of the Christian Faith. About ten years after this Damascus Road experience, a Christian leader by the name of Barnabas in the town of Antioch invited Paul to come over and help him in the little church that was taking root there. It was during that year that First Church, Antioch, asked Paul and Barnabas to serve as "ministers" abroad. They accepted the assignment and,

"After fasting and praying, they
laid hands on them and sent them off"

There are three distinct missionary journeys recorded for us in the Book of Acts that Paul undertook. He moved throughout the Mediterranean world, pioneering as an itinerant preacher across Asia Minor, Greece and Macedonia.

Wherever he went, he stirred up opposition with this Gospel about a Risen Lord who had revealed God's love to all men. He met opposition, believe me. His opponents harassed him, hurt him, falsely accused him, imprisoned him, beat him. And midway in his travels, his health broke...malaria or perhaps it was epilepsy. He asked God for healing and his prayers were not answered at all in the way that he wanted. But nothing stopped him. With great persistence, with tremendous faith and passion and power, he preached this Gospel of love for all people where no one had been before. It was Paul who took the "Christ even" out of Palestine and introduced it to the known world of his day.

At length, his travels even brought him to Rome and there the story ends. Some think he went as far as Spain. But tradition has it he died a martyr's death in Rome about the time of the Neroian persuction of 65 A. D. Whatever the manner of his death, he wrote his own epitaph when he said,

"I have fought the good fight. I have kept the faith. I have finished the course." Amen.

TRANSFORMATION

We would do well to consider the legacy of his life and here there are two things about Paul...about his message and his ministry....which to me shine undimmed right down to the present time.

First-off, he stands out as a clear example of the transformation that the spirit of Christ brings to a human life. Our faorefathers in the faith spoke of this transformation as "conversion". We don't use this term very much in our churches now-a-days...we're uncomfortable with it. I think we tend to place our emphasis more on respectability than on redemption. But, friend, if you take this New Testament by the arm and wonder what it's all about, it will speak to you not in terms of the attainment of respectability but rather of the gift of redemption through Christ.

The One who came into the world to fashion the New Testament where the Old left off promised that He could fashion and shape new lives out of old. And He did. And He continues to do so even today. We sing of "Amazing Grace" and as we do we are reminded that people can be "Born Again" and it was on this astonishing claim and conviction that the Christian Faith moved out into the Mediterranean world under Paul's direction.

Paul reminds us of the power of God to accomplish things - to redeem life, to restore life.

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" asked Paul in the midst of his own inner civil war. His answer, "Thanks be to God...through Jesus Christ our Lord".

And time and time again he points to what God has done "in Christ" and through Christ and then from his own experience he testified, "I KNOW" that this is the God who redeems from sin, who breaks those bad habits, who frees from fear, who sets love in motion, who restores sanity to life.

Some present this morning may need to hear that lifting word once again, to have it put before them. Oh, we're so quick to take refuge in that old cliché

"AW....but you can't change human nature."

But either that cliché is false or the entire New Testament record is false, and I, for one, I'm willing to put my faith in that claim....in the Christ spirit, whose spirit changed the life of Paul, whose spirit changed the lives of Luther and Wesley and yes, many others...right down to the present. "Can a person be born again?" asked Nicodemus of Jesus. Indeed, he can.

And hearing this claim for ourselves, we also need to hear of its possibilities for others. This is what New Testament Christianity is all about - that process, which William James described in his classic definition of conversion in his book, Varieties of Religious Experience:

"That process...gradual or sudden...by which a self hitherto divided and consciously wrong...inferior and unhappy, becomes UNIFIED and consciously RIGHT, superior and happy...in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities."

It happened to Paul and to so many since that day...and it can still happen.

"Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think....."

APPLICATION

And the other thing that stands out in Paul's life is this. He is a fine example of a man who courageously applied his religious conviction to all areas of life. Those people who tend to think of religion as a kind of cloistered area of life...walled off...saved and sealed only for Sundays from eleven to twelve, entirely personal and without any social implications will find little support from Paul. "Lord, what will You have me do?" asked Paul in one of his Damascus Road recollections, and he spent the rest of his life witnessing to the "Lordship" of Christ in every realm of life.

And it brought him into sharp conflict with the prejudices of his day. "You are all ONE in Christ" said Paul. "Here there cannot be Greek or Jew, slave and free man, but Christ is all and in all". Many Jews flinched at his words, especially when he said he had been sent to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. That was the "spark" that set fire to the flame.

"Away with this man. He ought not to live"
they said....."YOU are all ONE in Christ!"

Yet, it was not only about race that Paul spoke. He talked about a Christian and his money. He talked about a Christian in his home. He talked about a Christian in his business...in society. No punches were pulled. He was simply applying his faith "in Christ" to all walks of life. For me, he soars to great heights in Romans 8 and in Romans 12 and in I Corinthians 13. Take time to read them as he reflects about life "in the body of Christ".

Dear Abby had an interesting letter in her column in the Post back about ten years ago that was worth clipping and I share it with you.

Dear Abby: One of the toughest tasks a church faces is choosing a good minister. A member of an Official Board undergoing this painful process finally lost patience.

He'd watched the Pastoral Relations Committee reject applicant after applicant for some fault, alleged or otherwise. It was time for a bit of soul-searching on the part of the committee. So he stood up and read a letter purporting to be from another applicant.

'Gentlemen: understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications....I've been a preacher with much success and also some success as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer. I've been a leader most places I've been.

I'm over 50 years of age. I have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places I have left town after my work has caused riots and disturbances. I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrongdoing. My health is not too good, though I still get a great deal done. The churches I have preached in have been small, though located in several large cities. I've not got along well with religious leaders in towns where I have preached. In fact, some have threatened me and even attacked my physically. I am not too good at keeping records. I have been known to forget whom I have baptised.

However, if you can use me, I shall do my best for you'

The board member looked over the committee. 'Well, what do you think? Shall we call him?'

The good church folks were aghast. Call an unhealthy, trouble-making, absent minded ex-jailbird? Was the board member crazy? Who signed that application. Who had such colossal nerve? What's his name?

The board member eyed them all keenly before he answered. 'It's signed, THE APOSTLE PAUL!'

E. Stanley Jones, that great evangelical spirit and missionary in India in the thirties and forties and who penned a great many devotional books....E. Stanley Jones once said to Ghandi that he would like to see Christianity a part of the national life of India and he asked Gandhi, the great Indian leader, "What would you suggest that we do to make this possible?" Gandhi's reply was

"FIRST: I would suggest that all of you Christians must begin to live more like Jesus Christ. SECOND: I would suggest that you must practice your religion without adulterating or toning it down. And THIRD: I would suggest that you must put your emphasis upon LOVE....for LOVE is the center and the soul of Christianity."

Said Paul, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels....and have not love....." "And now abideth faith, and hope and love - these three...but the greatest of these is LOVE."

PRAYER

Our thanks to you, gracious God...our Father...for people like Paul. Wrestle with us in the dark and shadowed corners of our lives. Touch the restless, unhappy and divided lives present with love. Melt us. Mold us. Shape us. Use us....spirit of the living God.... and make each of us captives of Christ, our Lord. In His name we pray. Amen.