

Conversion: What is it? And why?

January 7, 2024

Scripture: Matthew 9:9

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

Christians, ourselves, are flummoxed by certain words popular in Christianity; and the outside world is even more put off by them. Words like: Repent. Born again. Revival. Salvation. And today's word: conversion. I tell people all the time, before you give up on some word go back to its roots, its most basic meaning, not what it has been turned into. Conversion simply means "to change." When you land in a foreign country almost the first thing you do is to change money, you convert your US money into the currency of the country you're visiting. If you want a good visit, a successful visit, you must convert.

Your car has a "catalytic converter," so important that it's the #1 stolen item. It used to be car radios, now it's the "converter," which changes harmful emissions into something more acceptable. Which is not a bad analogy for personal conversion, religious conversion, Christian conversion. At some point there was a version of ourselves that was not so good, not so positive, not so healthy. So, we make a decision to change. It's a very "New Year's" thing, isn't it?! We find our knees aching, or we lose our breath climbing stairs, or your doctor gives you that "look," or you start napping in the morning and you realize change is in order. You decide to lose weight, stop smoking, cut back on drinking, start exercising, eat healthier. You are changing your lifestyle. You are undergoing "conversion." That's a good thing. The bad thing is when it's forced upon us. We don't like that. We get defensive. That's when we hear people say, "You're trying to convert

me...don't try to change me...you're not my mother...". Or the newer version, "you're not the boss of me." We don't like other people coming down hard on us or pointing out our flaws. Remember those old grammar school report cards? Heck, I didn't mind a "D" of a "72," but I hated the "N." "N," for "Needs Improvement."

But let's face it: we all need improvement. In ways large or small. In matters urgent or mundane. Or issues that affect everyone around you. It's unfortunate that in religious terms "conversion" has boiled down to changing your religion. You're called a "convert" if you switch from sitting in a pew in one place to sitting in a pew in another place. There are even mission agencies that set goals for their missionaries, a set number of "conversions" or your funding dried up. That's not conversion as Jesus practiced it, or as the Bible envisioned it. Conversion isn't about changing religion. Conversion is about changing your life. Real conversion is real change. And to get real change you need to need it. You need to KNOW you need it and you need to want it. It may help if other people know you need it and if other people want you to know you need it.

But sooner or later, you need to need it. You need to know you need it and you need to want it. That's your "rule of thumb" for any aspect of change in any aspect of your life: relational, behavioral, work, health, family, or faith. And the Bible is really instructive on this. Do you remember our Bible verse for today, the worlds' shortest Sunday sermon scripture lesson? One verse. It's from St. Matthew's Gospel and Matthew is actually telling about his own conversion. He writes in the third person.

"As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth; and Jesus said to him, "Follow me. And Matthew got up and followed him." (Matthew 9:9)

That's short and sweet, isn't it? At least at first glance.

The most famous conversion story is about St. Paul, here's the "cliff notes" version. Paul was a Jewish Roman citizen from Greece, a fervent and devout Jew, a profound scholar, a fervent defender of pure Judaism in the face of persecution and challenges. Such ardent devotion put him in conflict with early Christians who saw themselves as an extension of Judaism, even a fulfillment of Judaism. Paul and Christianity were literally on a collision course, he was, in fact, a key leader of the persecution of early Christians. As a result, his "conversion" was a shock to him, to everyone around him. He left his former way of being, his former way of believing, changing his priorities, his perceptions, his view of the world. His conversion was so spectacular, so surprising, so seemingly sudden that it actually has a name as a prototype of conversion: "A Damascus Road Conversion."

Paul was on his way to Damascus to defend Judaism from the heresy of Christians when a bright light knocked him blind, a voice from heaven confronted him, and his whole theological world came crumbling down. Jesus, the dead Jesus when he denied and opposed, said to Paul bluntly "Why are you persecuting me?" This shook Paul to the core, he did a deep reevaluation of his life and did a thorough "change," a 180-degree conversion. From trying to destroy Christianity he becomes the primary advocate for Christianity, travelling the Middle East, starting churches, writing one half of the New Testament, spreading Christianity.

That "prototype" I mentioned, a "Damascus Road Conversion," refers to those "bolt of lightning" experiences that seem to transform us in an instant. A car accident you shouldn't have survived makes you a better driver. A health scare gets you to take better care of yourself. A family crisis leads you to spend more time with your family. Events like 9/11 sent many of us to the drawing board to reevaluate our lives and priorities. So, we have Paul, setting out to destroy Christianity when "presto" he becomes a Christian. Or in our scripture lesson, Matthew is doing his crooked job as a taxman for the Roman government. When Jesus walks up to him, calls out to him and Matthew instantly changes the course of his life to follow Jesus.

Well, maybe. I don't doubt that there are sudden conversions, spur of the moment changes of heart, blinding lights, and cold turkey. But most of the time most of us are in process. We are on a journey, it is stop and go, fits and spurts, detours, and sidetracks. I was reading in the NY Times sports section about three American mountain climbers who recently completed the most difficult climb in the world, up the sheerest face of the toughest mountain in the Himalayas. It's called "Alpine" climbing. No oxygen, no support team, little equipment, lots of challenges. When the three guys got to the top, they only spent a couple of minutes there, a quick look around, then headed home. Because, they said, "it was all about the process." The journey. The path. Or what the Bible calls, "the way." We are all on the "the way" somewhere, good or bad, up or down.

Conversion is what we do to get back on track, to stay on track, or to find the track. I wish we knew more about St. Matthew. He's at work. Jesus shows up. Tells him to follow. Matthew follows – for the rest of his life, all the way to Martyrdom. But I'm pretty sure Matthew had been "in process" a long time. As a tax collector for the Roman government Matthew was "aiding and abetting" the enemy, he was despised by friends and neighbors. He's sold his soul. All that weighed on him, I bet: guilt, remorse, 2nd thoughts, 3rd thoughts, regrets. And my guess is that he was already looking around, thinking hard, wondering, imagining, maybe even praying. By the time Jesus shows up, Matthew is ready. For a change. For conversion. Not from Judaism to Christianity. There was no Christianity at that time. But there was a Jesus, offering Matthew second chances, a fresh start, a new way of being, a better version of himself.

And the truth is, most of us need – and want – a fresh start, a new way of life, at various points in our life. We get in a rut. With work. With family life and friendships. With faith. Things are stale, or worse. We're at a dead-end, or worse. We are not who, or where, we want to be. I've told you the story of my conversion a thousand times in books, sermons, and conversations, so I won't bore you again with gory details. And Christianity is full of stories of conversion, dramatic turn arounds in life, Mother Teresa, Paige Bueckers, George Bush, the younger, St. Francis of Assisi. I've told you enough times about my giving up

smoking a pipe after 40 years, that it is as boring for me to tell it as it is for you to hear it – again! So I won't!

All these stories share one thing in common, often enough and strong enough for me to repeat it for the fourth time today. You need to need it. You need to know you need it. You need to want it.

I'll almost close with a story from my coaching days. I had a boy on my baseball team, the best-looking batter I ever had. Tall. Handsome. Athletic. Looked terrific in a baseball uniform. Had a picture-perfect swing. Unfortunately, he never hit the ball. But he looked great striking out. Everyone said, "if he ever hit the ball, it'll go a country mile." But it never went a "country mile." Because he wanted to look good. Not be good. As a result, he refused to change anything. At all. Ever. He liked his rut.

This sermon had an odd beginning, an article about, and I quote, "A poet converted by her own writing." "Converted...by her own writing." It told the story of Denise Levertov, catch this, a Welsh, Russian Hasidic Jew Anglican agnostic convert to Catholicism. That's her background, a convoluted one, much like most of us, if we think about it. A little bit of this, a little bit of that, not only genetically and ethnically but spiritually as well. During her most agnostic days, she set out to write a long poem, about the "doubting St. Thomas," written along the structure of a Catholic Mass. She only wanted the structure, not the words, not the beliefs, not the faith, just the structure, a logical beginning, middle and end: the Kyrie, the Agnus Dei, Sanctus, Benedictus, etc. The end result is, she wrote herself into faith. The journey, the process, the way brought her to faith. She was ready to change. She was open for change. She accepted change.

Whatever change you need...Whatever change you KNOW you need...Whatever change you want...starts with your willingness to start the journey. We are all a "work in progress" if we progress.