

"God's Work"

Third Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Saturday, April 17, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 9:1-20

That wonderful humorist, Garrison Keillor, tells the story of Larry, a resident of the fictional town of Lake Wobegon. And although this is all story and humor, there always seem to be elements of truth to his tales. Listen as Keillor tells the story of Larry:

Larry was saved 12 times at the Lutheran Church in Lake Wobegon, an all-time record for a church that never gave altar calls. There wasn't even an organ playing 'Just As I Am Without One Plea' in the background. Regardless of that, between 1953 and 1961, Larry Sorenson came forward 12 times, weeping buckets and crumpled up at the communion rail, to the shock of the minister, who had delivered a dry sermon on stewardship. But now he needed to put his arm around this person, pray with him and be certain he had a way to get home.

Keillor, of course, couldn't resist commentary on the story. So, he continued:

Even the fundamentalists got tired of him. God didn't mean for you to feel guilty all your life. There comes a time when you should dry your tears and join the building committee and grapple with the problems of the church furnace and the church roof. But Larry just kept repenting and repenting.

Now, although this is clearly fiction, and humorous fiction at that, it is a tale that strikes a cord with us as Lutheran Christians. We hear about conversions of folks like Larry or those from other religious traditions; we read about amazing conversions in books and articles; we hear testimonies from relatives about how they were saved one dark and lonely night; and we may wonder about all this, because probably most of us who consider ourselves believers never had such a conversion experience in our lives. It makes one wonder, doesn't it? Is something wrong with me or with my faith? I haven't seen a burning bush, or had a vision of Christ, or been struck blind like Saul in today's lesson.

Well, I hope to clear some things up today about this conversion business. Let's look at today's tale of Saul and discover, perhaps, a new dimension and through that new discovery, maybe learn what this term "conversion," at least as it is understood Biblically, is all about. There may be a surprise here for us.

To begin with, let's look at most modern interpretations of this concept of conversion. When we hear the word and think about what it means, we probably have some preconceived notions. From the social point of view, it brings to mind reprobates, law-breakers, criminals, those who live on the other side of the tracks from us. From the intellectual point of view, we think of conversion in terms of unbelievers; it is what happens to agnostics, atheists, skeptics and cynics. From the missionary viewpoint, we think of conversion as what occurs among pagans, those who never heard about our

God, idol worshippers, and such. Religious conversion, most of us probably feel, is for the ungodly, the unbelievers, for sinners, for them out there.

So let's stop right here and learn the first lesson from today's first lesson. Saul of Tarsus fit none of the categories I just described. He was the best of believers. He was a superior student of the scriptures; a Pharisee, in fact. He was a dedicated defender of the demands of the law of God. Saul's so-called "conversion" was the conversion of an enthusiastic believer who was totally committed to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His single ambition in life was to be a dedicated and obedient servant of God. And yet, Saul of Tarsus was converted, or should I say "changed" and became Paul, the greatest missionary of the first century Christian Church.

In his insightful commentary on this text, biblical scholar Dr. Timothy Cargal writes this:

Traditionally this text has been referred to as 'The Conversion of Paul.' More recent scholarship has called that description into question, however. Inherent in the word 'conversion' is a rejection of a former commitment in favor of a new one. That Paul in that sense converted from Judaism to Christianity would probably have been rejected by the Apostle himself, and is at the least historically anachronistic. There simply were not separate and distinct religions of Judaism and Christianity at the time of Paul's encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

So, here's the first, very important, thing we learn from Paul's call to service – conversion is not about those who stand outside of God's reach, but it is for all who need to have their lives turned around. And that happens when God changes us; when God kills the old so that the new can live.

Saul, you see, died on that road to Damascus. Being struck blind, hearing the voice of Christ, having to be lead into the city as a poor beggar, his old life died. The power he thought he possessed over his life, the power he thought he had to persecute the renegade people of the Way, the power he thought he had from his training in the law, all was taken away, so that a new power could be given to him.

And we symbolize this in our own lives of faith as we die in the waters of baptism, to rise anew with the risen Christ. Baptism is the death of the old and the birth of the new. Our baptismal liturgy begins with this important insight: "God, who is rich in mercy and love, gives us a new birth into a living hope through the sacrament of baptism. By water and the Word God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ." That's what happens to each of us in this act.

And here is the second lesson from Saul to us. It is God who does the changing in us, not we ourselves. All the Larry's of the world who wail and whimper and whine at altar rails are not the true story of conversion. The true story is when we are changed by God's power, by God's Word, by God's love and forgiveness and grace. And sometimes, that isn't all that dramatic, and sometimes that happens more times than we can count, or maybe even know ourselves, because God continues to reach out to us and to kill that which is in us that makes us deaf, dumb and blind to his grace. I've never seen a burning bush. I can't say that I've ever had a major conversion experience like Saul. But I have been touched by God's love on many occasions and I have had my own life

turned around any number of times by God's hand, and those experiences are just as valid and just as important and just as meaningful as all the Larry's and the Saul's of Christendom.

One more lesson this morning, quickly. The final step of Saul's conversion, or change, from death to life, from Saul to Paul, from prosecutor to proclaimer, was the conversion of the Word that he heard, that grace that touched his life, the conversion of that into a life of faith, a life he went and lived. The life of faith we claim needs conversion, if we don't ever live that life outside of these walls. The life of faith we name needs conversion, if we live our Monday lives in total rejection of our Sunday lives. The life of faith we know needs conversion, if we claim the love and forgiveness of God for ourselves, and fail to live it with others. The life of faith we understand needs conversion, if the grace of God, which holds our lives, is never translated into acts of charity and love for others in the name of the One who loves us.

Do you see? Conversion is a matter of death to the old and life in the new. It is a matter of living the faith we claim and proclaiming the faith we live. And that conversion, for most of us anyway, is not all that dramatic. We, like Saul of Tarsus, are already believers. But where we are blind to the love and goodness of God, where we are deaf to the cries of God's people, where we are mute in the face of injustices and hatreds in our world, that's where God needs to touch our eyes so we can see, and our ears so we can hear, and our tongues so we can speak. That, my friends in Christ, is conversion. When the power of God's love touches us, and the forgiveness of God moves us, and the grace of God empowers us, such is conversion.

And I would be bold enough to claim that that power of God is offered to us everyday. Where are the scales blinding us? Where are the guilts of the past binding us? Where are the anxieties of tomorrow freezing us? Where are the hurts and the angers of our lives keeping us from being the kind of loving, caring, forgiving, grace-filled people God intends us to be? Those are the places where God's power needs to touch our lives. And those are the very places that he will.

AMEN.