

First Reading: Acts 9:1-6 [7-20]

Each of us has a story of meeting God's grace. Saul (later called Paul) was an ardent persecutor of all who followed the Way of Christ. This reading recounts the story of his transformation, beginning with an encounter with Jesus Christ on the way to Damascus.

¹Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." [⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."]

Gospel: John 21:1-19

¹After [he appeared to his followers in Jerusalem,] Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

When was the last time you were convinced of something, but then later were convinced you were wrong about that same thing? When was the last time you were convicted? Now I'm not asking for a show of hands on that one, but when was the last time you were convicted? Or how about this one – when was the last time you were converted?

Convinced, convicted, converted, when was the last time you experienced one of those? Now some added clarification on the word “convicted” that I said so far. I am not talking about conviction in the sense of a court of law, or some type of prison sentence or a fine, I am talking about hearing or experiencing something in such a strong way that you feel convicted by it. You are swayed. You are a part of what is being described.

This last week as we began our 242 services for the summer, under the theme: “Mic drop moments from the Bible.” We began by talking about how King David was convicted with the words of his prophet Nathan. Nathan knows that his king is guilty of bad behavior, but he must be careful how he informs him, or it could greatly back fire and even bring risk to his own life. So, Nathan uses a made-up story to speak about the cruelty of this action. When David demands to know who this person is so that a swift retribution may occur, his esteemed prophet answered: “You are the man!” This approach worked and David felt immediately convicted and sought God's forgiveness. Sometimes we have experienced certain things in life when we know that is being described, or what is being revealed, or what is unfolded applies directly to us – and we feel convicted. This can be things that are both good or bad.

Convinced, convicted, converted: when was the last time you were converted? Now some of you may have been here on the last Sunday of

2018. If you were here, you might recall I spoke of being converted. During the announcements, I mentioned that I now loved the Cleveland Browns!... I have a confession to make about that conversion: while I desperately wanted the Cleveland Browns to win the final game of their season, I had an ulterior motive. If the Browns beat the Ravens on that fateful day of December 30th, the Steelers would have made the playoffs. The Browns let me down of course, and I'm just about over that, but I immediately re-converted to my original team. My point is that I really wasn't a convert. My heart, my mind, my soul wasn't really into it, rather I was protecting my self-interest.

Convinced, convicted, converted, when was the last time you experienced one of those? While all of these have their distinct meaning, all of them apply to the event that describes what occurs to the Pharisee Saul in today's first reading. Today, we heard the famous account from the book of the Acts of the Apostles of how the apostle Paul was completely converted. He was convinced, convicted, and more importantly converted. He is probably one of the most, if not the most, famous converts of history, certainly in Christian history. The once threat maker and life destroyer of anyone claiming to be a follower of the way of the risen Christ, becomes one of the greatest and most profound witness to the faith in all of Christendom.

How do we hear that word "convert" today? How do most people even understand the word "converted" in a Christian context anymore? Is it a positive or negative thing? Being converted to Christianity, being converted to Jesus, almost seems like dangerous words to utter in our culture today. By dangerous, I do not mean fear of safety, at least here in America, though danger for one's life in professing Christianity is certainly a

reality in many other places; I am using “dangerous” here meaning there is a risk that we will turn off people all around us. Why is that? If after service today you are out to eat, and someone came up to you and shared that they were a recent “convert” to the Christian faith, and wanted to talk to you, how would you respond in this Easter season? Would you become apprehensive? Would you say tell me more? I would have to say that honestly, I would probably have a little voice go off inside of my brain saying: “Uh-oh” or “Oh no, oh no” and I might find myself tightening up and preparing to get a little defensive... and I’m a pastor for crying out loud. What is with that? Maybe because, like perhaps you have experienced, there have been times when the conversion of someone else has turned into a confrontation of my own beliefs with questions like: Are you really saved? How do you know? Maybe you experienced something like this:

I recall attending a church once or twice where the preacher that day was talking about the second coming of Christ. The preacher made it sound like one of the most terrifying events imaginable. He focused on the negative and missed the positive in all that he was speaking about. He didn't tell us about the peace, the joy, the hope, and the love that a Christian person can experience, but instead he looked out at the congregation and asked: "Where will you be when Jesus comes back? Will you be found in sin?" Nowhere in his sermon was there a hint of blessing – rather we were told that if we played cards, or danced, or listened to the wrong kind of music, that we would go straight to hell when we died. For him introducing people to faith, meant trying to scare people out of their wits. Maybe you have seen the billboards on Interstate 71 going toward Cincinnati, as well as many other places. Something that if you die to today... and then flames, and pitchforks... you get the idea.

The word conversion has unfortunately been abused by the church, by extremists, by perhaps even well-meaning Christians over the years, that I think for the most part it has brought a negative connotation to today's world. When people encounter the word "conversion" or "convert" many people begin looking for the exit sign. Many people are afraid they are going to get Bible thumped. One of the major reasons that un-Christians folks do not venture into a church to see what it is about, is a fear of what will happen to them, what will confront them, what judgment will be railed over them. This is where we as people of the faith have went astray. If you look at the life of Jesus, and his encounters with people outside and within the Jewish faith, rarely did he have words of harshness, rarely did he have words of exclusion. Most of the Jesus's strongest words were against those who thought they had it all figured out and were in the know.

Saul, who became the apostle Paul, was one of those who thought he had it all figured out. In an experience of seeing the light, or more accurately encountering a blinding light, Paul is converted. Paul turns around. He is not converted with an ulterior motive. He is not converted out of any selfish means. Instead he is convinced, convicted and converted to an emboldened life with Christ. It is a conversion that did not make his life easier, quite the contrary. However, Paul becomes a major player in spreading the love of Christ, the Gospel of Christ, the Good News of the Risen Christ that comes to all peoples regardless of economics, gender, social status, age, ethnicity, or country you are born in. This is a conversion that can warm our hearts and convict our souls. This type of conversion is not an insurance policy against some wrathful God, but it is an invitation to see the world differently, it is an offer to be free from self-made chains, it is a proposal to not be bound by human and worldly

standards, it is a covenant promise that we are forever changed, forever forgiven, forever loved and forever freed. The world cannot stop it. Even death cannot stop it. Even a cross cannot stop it. Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen!