

April 10 2016

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 30

Acts 9:1-20

Sermon *A Changed Heart*

Making a change in the way that we think, in the way that we feel, in the way that we see things or the way that we act can be difficult and painstakingly slow as a process. Making a radical or extreme change in any one of these areas are often impossible given the track record as we as average human being. To make note of the fact it has been nearly four months now since many of us made our New Year's Resolutions for the year 2016. I wonder how of many of us are still on that diet that we started after the Christmas Holiday? Anybody dare to raise their hands. Or how many of us are doing that exercise program that we said we would start just as soon as the weather warms up? Or watching less television or reading more or spending more time in a kind of active hobby or playing with the children or the grandchildren or putting that extra twenty-five dollars or fifty dollars away into savings instead of eating out or going to the movies. However, I would say, if you are taking the pastor out to eat that doesn't count. If you have allowed your New Years' resolution to go by the wayside, I think be assured that you are not alone in this group this morning. I was going to wager, if I was a betting man that you have a lot of company in the people sitting around you today. If on the other hand you are one of the few people who were able to stick with your resolution, all I can say is congratulations and keep the good work because you have shown all of us that change is not impossible and this can illustrate an important truth that with God's help no matter what the odds are we as human beings can from time to time change.

The term that Christians have given to the phenomenon of a profound change in the midst of life, is the word conversion. A word that has been much abused and misunderstood over the Christian centuries. A conversion in its most basic sense is a new way of seeing, a new way of interpreting, a new way of engaging, a new of living life day by day. Conversion is repentance in its most literally form, a turning so to speak from a path going in one direction to a path leading in the opposite direction. For Christians, of course that means taking the path to Jesus of Nazareth. Now anyone who has been a follower of Jesus for any length of time knows that in life there are a whole lot of entry points, a whole lot of onramps that can lead us lead to the mainstream of this pathway, this journey, this way of life which Jesus calls us. This morning I can think of at least three different ways.

First there is this entry point that I call nurture that is being raised as a Christian. The entry point that Horace Bushnell, the 19th century expert on Christian education advocated so very strongly. Conversion here is a subtle gradual thing. The person may seem to know no other way of life than following of the footsteps of Jesus.

The second entry point into the Christian faith is also a kind of quieter course. It involves a growing realization in a person's life that his/her life isn't really satisfactory the way that it is going, it is not fulfilling, it does not meeting basic emotional and spiritual needs of their life. So this realization may take its form of a kind of nagging feeling inside that may result in a gentle warming of the heart by God's spirit. It was the case for John Wesley the founder of what eventually became the United Methodist Church. Remember talking about John and the strange warming of the heart?

The final entry point which may be the pathway to Jesus may be the one which is very familiar to us in the story of St. Paul as we shall see. Things for him were going along fine in life until Wham the person is knocked on his behind so to speak by God. This may take place in some sort of supernatural way or some life experience like severe illness or loss of a job or death in the family or involved in war or some kind of tremendous family problem not caused by God to be sure but nevertheless used by God to give meaning to life in the midst in a time of tragedy and to show the person the reality of God's love, the reality of God's forgiveness, the reality of God's direction during the course of life. A lesson from the book of Acts this morning reminds us that this is the case of St. Paul, known as Paul of Tarsus. Paul which eventually became one of the chief interpreters of Jesus' teaching in the Christian world and the best known missionary sent by the early church to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. We would never have believed it would be possible as we begin reading this passage in the book of Acts that Joan shared with us.

Paul still had the stoning of Stephen fresh on his mind when he asked for papers which would permit him to go to Damascus and drag even more Christians home to Jerusalem for even more punishment. No doubt might Paul might have been more open to Jesus teaching but here we see him as tough as nails, chief of all the enemies of the Way of Jesus. He is literally knocked to the ground; he is literally blinded; he is driven into the loving arms of Ananias and the care of God. Ananias nurtured Paul back to health, where he is baptized and where he is sent out to claim the good news of Jesus. Paul is a changed man, his mind is changed, his attitude is changed, his behavior is changed but more important than all of these things he had a change of heart. His inner being has been filled with spirit of the living Jesus Christ.

Now today I don't think there is not a one of us here who has not had some kind of conversion in that literally sense that I mentioned before. It might have taken the form of committing our lives to the way of Jesus for the very first time in our lives; it might have entailed recommitting our lives by taking those hurts, taking the brokenness of life and laying all of these things before God for healing; it may take the form of changing our point of view to be receptive to some new ideas some new way of looking at life; some new behavior that God's spirit might be pressing upon our hearts today.

And if there is any message to be found in this story of Paul's conversion I think it is this, we can make change a reality in our lives, I will say that again, we can make change a reality in our lives. We can do great things for the world as a result of those changes and we do not have to make those changes without the help of God, we do not have to those changes without the love of those who love and care for us in this life.

In closing the new creed of the United Church of Christ Canada I think offers us encouragement as we seek to make significant changes in our lives right now. The words go like this, "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen