

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Praying to be Converted – Again

Acts 11.1-18

May 6, 2007

Amy Jacks Dean



Introduction to reading Scripture

The text today is the third and final repeating of the same story – back to back – told all three times almost exactly the same. All of chapters 10 and 11 of the Acts of the Apostles deal with this one story. It’s almost always referred to as the conversion of Cornelius. Which I find interesting. This is how the first verses of Chapter 10 begin: *In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o’clock (the time of afternoon prayer) he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” He stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” He answered, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter.”*

Now correct me if I am wrong, but it doesn’t sound to me like Cornelius needs converting. He already believes, and he is already practicing his faith. So he sends a crew to Peter, who coincidentally has a vision of his own the next day. Peter is on his roof, praying, and he’s hungry and he gets a vision of animals that he is forbidden by religious law to eat. At the end of the vision, Cornelius’ entourage arrives. Peter, a good Jew, lodges them for the night and returns with them the next day to meet with Cornelius, a good Gentile.

I think Peter couldn't quite believe it himself – that he would eat and lodge with Gentiles. For Peter is was an Us vs Them world and he was fraternizing with the “other,” the “unclean,” the “them,” the “forbidden” (remember the vision?) And on top of it all, to believe and accept that God's Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles as much as it was poured out on the Jews – it was too much. But Peter baptized Cornelius and all his folks that day. I contend that this text shouldn't be known as the conversion of Cornelius. This text should be footnoted in my Bible as the conversion of Peter. Hear it now as Peter retells it to his Jewish brethren in Jerusalem.

READ TEXT

The very first time I was converted, I don't remember. At least I don't remember in the way that some say you are supposed to remember. When I was a child, the pastor of our little country church said that if you didn't remember the day and the time that you accepted Jesus into your heart, then you were not saved. This worried my 80-something year old grandmother something terrible. She couldn't remember a time when she didn't believe and she couldn't remember a specific time that she “accepted.” But she sure thought herself to be saved. I share MaPolly's story. I think I keep good company. I don't remember not being Christian. This is the only way I have ever known – so no “Damascus Road” experience for me. I've known about Jesus since I've known about anything, and I have tried to be a follower all of my days – even before making any formal profession of faith or any baptism. So as far as any conversion story to tell you about that involved a movement, and change, or a turn from not following Jesus to following Jesus is simply not a part of my story.

But conversion is my story. Since conversion is not a one-time event, I confess to many conversions. Conversion is always happening, and I am praying to be converted - again. As Russ was preaching last Sunday on racism and white privilege, I was reminded of my conversion. I can vividly remember as a child saying, “Eeny-meeny-mino-mo, catch a nigger by the toe.” (I can hardly even bring myself to say it or spell it - and I’m not just being “politically correct” – I wouldn’t be comfortable using any vulgar word from this pulpit.) But back then, I didn’t think a thing about it. My conversion was slow, methodical, step-by-step. Most conversions are, I believe. It was a movement to stop saying the “n” word to not telling jokes that denigrate people of color to not laughing when other people tell them to speaking out against telling the joke in the first place. It has been a 20 year turning – a 20 year conversion for me. I am currently in the midst of understanding this conversion in terms of white privilege. I have more converting to do in this area. I am a work in progress. I am praying to be converted – again.

Remembering that conversion reminded me of another conversion. I remember where I was standing – second floor of Norton Hall on the campus of Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY. My Formations class had just ended and I was standing in the doorway talking with Lea Alexander. Russ’ class was over and we stood there and discussed homosexuality. I remember saying, “It’s just not natural. You don’t see animals of the same sex together.” (Lea gently corrected my misinformation, but I don’t think I believed her.) I continued, “If everyone were gay we wouldn’t be able to replenish the earth with people.” (I don’t remember her laughing, but she should have!) And though I don’t remember saying it, surely I did, “But the Bible says . . .” My conversion was slow, methodical, step-by-step. Most conversions are, I believe. As I read more and discussed more and listened

more, I began to make a turn. And then in a class on Pastoral Care in Human Crisis, a panel discussion was held for our class of 100+. A former seminary student, and minister, and a father of three grown children all sat at the front of the class. I listened as they told their stories. I do believe that story-telling is the best way to make conversions happen. Maybe that's why Peter kept telling that story of his vision and Cornelius over and over and over again. I have made slow movements in my turning process. Even more conversion has occurred for me in our almost 7 years here in this place. I have more converting to do in this area. I am a work in progress. I am praying to be converted – again.

What about you? What have been your conversions over the years? How have you turned and in the turning found yourself more surefooted on the path that follows Jesus? Those are important questions to ask and to celebrate. In remembering my own conversions I was aware of the resistance and fear within during those turning times. It is the fear and resistance that keeps me from being open to conversion again. And so I wonder – what is it that I need to be converted about now? *If something like a large sheet were to come down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me (Acts 11.5), what would I see today? And would I be open to the change that would have to take place in order to see the vision become a reality? Would I be able to overcome my fear and move past my resistance? Who needs to be included that I keep at a distance? What slice of my judgmental and prejudiced nature needs to be converted?*

Peter is amazing in this story. He risks so much by accepting Cornelius. He runs counter to the culture in eating with a Gentile, much less accepting God's acceptance of a people Peter had considered unclean for his whole life. *What God has made clean, you must not call profane.* That vision must have been the beginning of Peter's conversion

story. It didn't have anything to do with what he could and could not eat. It had to do with shoe he would and would not accept. He resisted three times. Surely he must have been afraid. But he did not let this deter him from living the Truth.

What do you fear? Who are you resisting? Russ and I often critique each other's sermons on the way home after church. Often we say "good job," "great insight," "courageous," "creative," etc. But our critique usually has to do with the take home. Good sermon, but there was nothing offered as tangible "to dos" in response to the sermon. Like last week in Russ' sermon on white privilege he offered us nothing to do about it. Well today, I offer you nothing as well. If there are 200 people in the room, there are probably 200 different conversions that need to be made. I don't know what kind of conversion you need. I only know what I need to be converted about – and I am resisting it all the way.

"A basic and valuable truth about conversion [is] that we do not suddenly change in essence, magically becoming new people, with all our old faults left behind. What happens is more subtle, and to my mind, more revealing of God's great mercy. In the process of conversion, the detestable parts of our selves do not vanish so much as become transformed. We can't run from who we are, with our short tempers, our vanity, our sharp tongues, our talents for self-aggrandizement, self-delusion, or despair. But we can convert, in its root meaning of turn around, so that we are forced to face ourselves as we really are." (Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith, Kathleen Norris, page 296)

"There is a question for us, lurking behind today's text from Acts. The question: Will we allow the Holy Spirit to prod us today, to give us a vision, to drag us, as it

dragged our apostolic forebears before us, kicking and screaming, all the way toward the wideness of God's mercy? Or will we hunker down right here with folk just like us? Safe. Secure. Boundaries firmly fixed. And the Holy Spirit gone on elsewhere, instrument of a living God determined to have the whole world as his own . . . Fred Craddock, tells about a church he knew. He remembered it as the status church, First Church Downtown, it was called. Everybody who was anybody went to that church, when Fred was a boy. Not just anybody could walk in there and join. Income and proper attire seemed a membership requirement at First Church. Need was say? People of Color need not apply. As you might imagine, First Church did not receive many new members. Members simply grew older. As an adult, Fred learned that First Church had closed. Too few people of the "right type," I guess. Fred had occasion to go back to town and discovered that old First Church was still standing. But now it was a restaurant, a fish restaurant. He walked in the big gothic doors and, sure enough, where there had once been pews, now there were tables, and waiters, and diners. He looked down the nave of the old church and where the communion table had once stood, now there was a salad bar. He walked out the front door, back down the steps, muttering to himself, "Now, I guess everybody is welcome to eat at the table." (5/10/1998 – "When the Outsiders Become Insiders," sermon by Dean William Willimon)

I hope that our church will always be a place more like that fish restaurant - complete with salad bar and all - where all are welcome at the table – whether Christian or Gentile whether black or white whether gay or straight. And I hope that the kitchen table at my house will have the same kind of welcome. I pray that we, like Peter, will be converted – again and again and again. May it be so.