

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18 – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 9.6.20
Ezekiel 33:7-11, Psalm 119:33-40, Romans 13:8-14. Matthew 18:15-20

Conversion is a term which speaks of change. We convert many things in our daily life so much so that we do it without thinking. We turn on a switch and electricity is turned into light, we have gasoline in the car which when converted means we can ride instead of walk to where we are going. The credit we have on our credit card is converted to cash each time we buy something using that card. It all works seemingly seamlessly.

We speak of someone who has come to faith as having been “converted”. In a way this is a misnomer. Their outlook and perspective, the way they behave may be changed, converted but at core they remain the person God created them to be, only more so.

Religious conversion is the way we speak of someone finding the light, the path, the way in which God has always intended them to go. All of us have been converted, and in fact continue to be converted in this sense, all of our life long. For some there are dramatic events that mark a change of direction, for others, it is a continual growth toward the wholeness of personhood that God has designed for each of us. Matthew in his gospel quotes Jesus as telling his followers to be perfect as God is perfect. Like so many meanings when translated from one language to another, this passage gives a false impression. What Jesus is really telling us is that we were created in the image of God, a God who is perfect in the sense of whole. We are to continue all our lives to grow toward that wholeness that is God. It is a lifelong adventure.

The Apostle Paul, author of the Letter to the Romans, read this morning, had the experience of a dramatic conversion. He was a Pharisee, a persecutor of the newly emerged group of followers of the resurrected Jesus and at that time his name was Saul. On his way to Damascus from Jerusalem to arrest the followers of Jesus he would find there, Saul heard the voice of Jesus, asking why he persecuted him. Saul was blinded, led to Damascus and over several days came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Saul became Paul, a name change that marked the beginning of his life-long conversion. Paul changed from being the persecutor of the Christians to being their greatest advocate and theologian. From Damascus, Paul traveled and preached on the island of Cyprus, in several cities of Asia Minor, in Greece, in Rome and perhaps even as far as Spain. He was rarely the first to preach in any of these places’ others had come before, slaves, merchants, soldiers, and all manner of people who had been converted and then took their newly found relationship with God where ever they went. The Church in Rome to which Paul wrote from Corinth had been established by immigrants to the city Rome.

All roads did indeed lead to Rome, the capital of the empire and the place of power and wealth. There had been Jews in the city for many years, part of the diaspora. The Temple in Jerusalem was far away and so to worship together, the Jews established prayer houses, the forerunners of synagogues. Some Gentiles were attracted to these houses of prayer. They were known as “God-fearers”, those who were not ethnically Jews, but who believed in the God of Israel.

Life was not easy for Jews in Rome or anywhere in the empire. The Romans had a different religion, one based on many gods, and on the worship of the emperor as semi-divine. They believed that when things went badly their gods were displeased because not everyone worshiped them. The Jews, believers in the one true God, refused to worship idols which is

how they saw the Roman gods. The result was that the Jews were often driven into exile. When the crisis had passed the Jews were allowed to return, they were necessary to the economic well-being of the empire. The story repeated itself under the emperor Claudius in 49 C.E. The Jews were driven out, but the Gentile god fearers remained. Many of these were now followers of Jesus, Christians. Staying, they continued in the houses of prayer and in spreading their faith, adding converts to their number. When Claudius died in 54 C.E. the Jews returned to Rome and to the houses of prayer they had left. But things had not remained the same. The Jews returning held to the faith of the Torah, the law which must be kept until the Messiah came. The gentiles who had remained in the houses of prayer had come to believe that the promise of God had been fulfilled in Jesus.

It is this tension of belief that caused Paul to write to the Roman believers. He has heard of the dissension and knows that these groups are badly in need of reconciliation.

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul sets out the way in which the followers of Jesus are to live their lives. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." In advising that we owe no one, Paul is not concerned with financial obligations. The term translated "owe" really refers to any obligation. What Paul is encouraging his followers in Rome to do is to fulfill their obligations and keep their promises. The greatest obligation is to the Law, as it is understood and preached by Jesus. The law known as Love.

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. It is the power of love that reconciles. In answer to the question what is the greatest commandment, Jesus answered: "The first commandment is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There are no other commandments greater than these." In reminding the Romans of what Jesus had said, he brought the possibility of peace. For the observant Jews, a rabbi, Jesus, had reminded them that the Torah/Law was based on love of God and of neighbor, even those pesky gentiles. For the gentile followers of Jesus, Paul reminded them that love was the fulfillment of the promise of God to the whole world.

The love that Jesus and Paul were talking about had little to do with the emotion we are accustomed to equating with love. The love that they had in mind had to do with behavior rather than feeling. When we act in love toward our neighbors we will put their needs first, we will be willing to sacrifice in order that the neighbor can survive. It has been aptly said that "Our neighbors will know that we love them by how we treat them,..." Not by words but by actions. Not by promises made but by promises kept.

It is the love of neighbor, expressed by action that builds communities of peace and of prosperity for all. Jesus defined neighbor as "...any human being with whom we interact." There is a large body of people waiting to experience our love, a large body of people some of whom we meet every day who will know of our love by our actions.

There is a folk song, a marching song from South Africa. "We are marching in the light of God." the refrain of this marching song says much about how we are to live our lives. In the words of another preacher, "...how we march makes all the difference to the end of the journey."

What better way to close than with the words of Jesus. "Love one another as I have loved you, for love is of God."