

# THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL THE APOSTLE

January 29, 2012

The Acts of the Apostles 26:9-21

Matthew 10:16-22

Jesus commissions his disciples in the opening sentences of the tenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, the part which immediately precedes the text we just heard. He shares his vision and gives his disciples some 'talking points,' an action plan, and the promise that they would not be alone on their journey. That's it! Matthew identifies the 12 by name, and makes sure that his name is listed correctly as Matthew 'the tax collector'- you know, the one considered a traitor and thief by his own community, that one. "Yes, it's me," Matthew seems to say in a very subtle way. "Believe it or not, I'm one of the ones commissioned by Jesus to share in his mission and ministry!" Matthew then describes how Jesus gives them authority to act in his name. "Proclaim the good news," Jesus tells them. "The Kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." And Jesus wraps it up in a one-line elevator speech: "the gift you have received, give as a gift."

*The gift you have received, give as a gift.*

The practical instructions Jesus gives for the journey sound like an impossible mission. Go like sheep in a world filled with many wolves. Be careful. Be vigilant. As a matter of fact, "be clever as a snake and, at the same time, be innocent as a dove." So what should we 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples make of this 1<sup>st</sup> century commissioning? And how is this connected to the Conversion of St. Paul? And what does this mean for us as a parish family, a church here in Greenville? - as we commission our vestry today, as we begin anew with our annual parish meeting, as we put ourselves and our gifts at the service of others in the spirit of Jesus.

The authority the first disciples had was the authority of Jesus. I suspect what is true for us today was no less true for Matthew and the first disciples of Jesus, and it is that despite the challenges, despite the questionable likelihood of success, despite the inevitable difficulty in trying to accomplish what Jesus could do far more easily than we can, Christ confidently commissions us today, like he did his first disciples then, to proclaim and live the good news that the reign or kingdom of God is indeed in our midst. We don't need to be perfect, or polished, or even in control when it comes to having the right 'talking points.' What we do need to see and appreciate is the gift we have been given and how we might wisely and generously share this gift with others. Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he says that God's grace is sufficient for us and that God's power comes through in our weakness. It's what comes through loud and clear for me when I listen to the story of his **conversion**.

**God's grace is sufficient for us. God's power comes through in our weakness.** Try this as your tag line running for governor of NC or president of the United States of America when asked about your religion and how your faith might affect or influence your politics! Try keeping this conviction of Paul as the mantra in the deliberations and resolutions of our Diocesan Convention this week and of our annual parish meeting today! Just as leaders of nations, states and cities must call its citizens to a common good beyond any vested interest, so also leaders in our church: our wardens, vestry and clergy, together with our bishop and diocese, must call one another as members of Christ's body to the One without whom our church has no legitimacy, mission or vision.

We see in our patron, Paul the Apostle, what the Good News of Jesus is all about: the transforming grace and power of Christ's Spirit at work in our lives, in our parish and in our world. Paul would write in his letter to the Galatians, long after his conversion: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Quite a transformation, isn't it? Saul of Tarsus, a religious terrorist, a radical fundamentalist, blinded quite unexpectedly by the light of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. What a story! But it's what it took for God to get his attention. The powerful proclamation of our first lesson we heard from The Acts of the Apostles, created by Dr. Janette Fishell during her tenure here, raises a question today for us as a church: what does it take for God to get our attention? We, like Paul, never met the Jesus of history who lived in Palestine. Like Paul, however, we encounter the Risen Christ living within the hearts and lives of those baptized in his Spirit as faithful disciples.

The mystery of Christ is at the center of our life together as a parish family. We affirm this mystery by living more fully into our mission of knowing Christ and making Christ known. It's what St. Paul did once he recognized and accepted the call God had given him. "I work and struggle," Paul writes to the Christian community at Colossae, "impelled by that energy of (Christ) which is so powerful a force within me" (1:29). He says in the same epistle: "I became a minister of this church, through the commission God gave me to preach among you...the mystery of Christ in you" (1:25,27).

It's what we celebrate today in our worship, in our annual parish meeting, in the commissioning of our wardens, vestry and youth representatives on vestry - and in our time together at lunch in our parish hall, following the meeting: ***The mystery of Christ in US!***

The Celtic blessing I frequently use at the end of our service of Holy Eucharist comes from Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. In it, he exhorts the faithful to "admonish the unruly, cheer the fainthearted; support the weak; be patient toward all. See that no one returns evil to any other; always seek one another's good and, for that matter, the good of all. Rejoice always, never cease praying, render constant thanks, such is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (5:14-17).

Let us pray.

*O Lord, for Paul's conversion, we bless your Name today.  
Come shine within our darkness and guide us in the Way.*

Amen.

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