

Call and Conversion

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Phillip C. Bennett

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St. Peter's Church in the City of Philadelphia: Open Hearts, Open Minds

Matthew 4:12-23:

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

We have just heard a dramatic story of call and conversion. Four Hebrew fishermen—two sets of brothers—are at work, fishing and mending their nets. A stranger comes along and tells them to follow him. In an instant, they leave their nets, their families, their home town and follow him wherever he leads. Was this really the way that Peter and Andrew, James and John met and followed Jesus? Was it really as abrupt as the gospel describes, or has the story been compressed? Has the drama been heightened to tell us something of quick response and total surrender to God's kingdom? We will never know the answers to these questions. Whatever the actual facts of the disciples' encounters with Jesus, the story certainly conveys the excitement, suddenness and costliness of discipleship. It also suggests that God finds us wherever we are and then uses our own language and experience to draw us into the Kingdom. Jesus tells these fishermen, "I will make you fish for people." He doesn't change them from fishermen to statesmen or theologians. Instead he gives them a new reason to fish; he gives them a new catch.

"Call" and "conversion": what are we to make of these two very loaded words? First, the call. In scripture the call is often depicted in a very literal way: The boy Samuel hears God calling his name as he sleeps in the temple: "Samuel, Samuel!" God calls to Moses from the Burning Bush to lead his people out of slavery. The angel of God comes to Sarah and to Mary and tells them they will conceive a holy child. At Jesus' baptism, the clouds part and a voice calls out, "This is my Beloved, my Son in whom I am well pleased." Saul of Tarsus is struck to the ground on the road to Damascus and hears the call of Jesus, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Following in this Hebrew tradition, the early Christians used the Greek word "ecclesia"—those who have been called out—to describe the early church. We may not have heard our name called in a literal way, but by whatever route we have come to this church this morning, we have all been called

and we have all answered. It may take years to discern how God has been calling us. Usually God calls us through our everyday experience, through the duties and opportunities right in front of us. Above all, God calls us to be ourselves, to use our gifts—as well as our limitations—to work for love and compassion in this troubled world.

The other word “conversion” is often misunderstood. *Webster’s International Dictionary* defines conversion as “an abrupt and rapid change to an enthusiastic religious attitude with the highly emotional experience and other conspicuous features accompanying it” and then adds with an ironic finish, “whether lasting or not.” This is conversion in the old tent-meeting revival style: a sudden, emotional event. Or we sometimes speak of people “converting” to the Episcopal Church or some other denomination. Or of “fox hole or deathbed conversion.” All these focus on the convert’s act of changing and the subjective feelings that arise. But this is a narrow understanding of conversion. Conversion—as the Latin root tells us—means turning around, turning towards God. And it is God who does the drawing, the pulling and sometimes the prodding. In fact, our resistance to conversion is a natural feature of our humanity, and it is often through our resistance that God draws us. Whether gradual or dramatic, God is the one who calls and God is the one who turns us around. God is there drawing us, often before we are aware of it. This is what Augustine of Hippo calls “previent grace”: God goes ahead of us and calls us from the future of his grace into of our present situation. Conversion--and our resistance to it-- happen every day, every moment and finds us where we are, not where we would wish ourselves to be.

Commenting on the monastic rule of St. Benedict, scholars note that Benedict does not use the word “conversion”—in Latin, “*conversio*,” meaning change, moral conversion, circular movement--to describe the Christian life. Instead he uses the word “*conversatio*,” which means “a conversation, frequent abode in one place, frequent use.” So Benedictines define their monastic vows as obedience, conversion of life and *stability*—staying in one place, living our vocation exactly where we find ourselves. Conversion is not only a dramatic change of direction; it is also abiding in our present circumstance. Above all, conversion is a conversation—a lifelong conversation--with God, with others and with ourselves.

It is almost 16 years to the day since I first came to St. Peter’s. I can’t believe how time passes when you’re having a life! I am deeply grateful that God called me here; grateful for all the ways I have met God in the flesh in you and so many who have come through these doors. My time with you has been part of my ongoing conversion, my conversation with God, with you, with myself. Now a new call has come. But the conversation is the same—and goes on till we come to the end of this life. Change brings loss and gain, goodbyes and hellos. Know that I carry you in my heart and prayers and I trust you will do the same for me.

As I was cleaning out my father’s house after his death last year, I found a copy of the book *Love’s Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*, edited by Rowan Williams and others, which I had given him the previous Christmas. My eye came across this passage where he had placed a bookmark. William Braithwaite O’Brien, a superior of the Cowley Fathers, an Anglican monastic community, writes a letter to an older person. Father O’Brien himself is 82. The editors have titled this excerpt “The Depression of Old Age.” I share it not because I am old or depressed—although I suppose both are inevitable in our human condition if we live long

enough. I share it because it spoke to me of call and conversion in the nitty-gritty of our lives. Father O'Brien writes:

Old age is depressing, and our constant failures and slow progress are depressing—the weather is depressing and makes all the depressing things seem worse, but they do not separate us from God. They are meant to draw us nearer to him who *is* so near to us in order to *revive* us. You will say, “But I cannot find him.” Perhaps not; but he is finding you, and perhaps the fault is that you do not know where to look for him. I think you should look for him in just the things which seem to keep you from him. Take your troubles to him; speak to him as you would to me; tell out to him the hardness of your circumstances and the hardness of a selfish unloving heart and ask his help. You would not be so conscious of this unloving spirit if there was *no* love or generosity in your heart. Pray to him as one who is working in you; ask for more grace to believe in, hope in, and trust in his sure working.

As this old monk reminds us, we should look for God in just those things which seem to keep us from God. We may feel we cannot find God, but God is finding us, whether we know it or not. God is working in us, calling us, converting us, turning us again and again to him. It doesn't matter if the call from God is dramatic—as with the fishermen disciples—or very ordinary and seemingly hidden—as with the older, discouraged person to whom Father O'Brien writes. The call is always same: to let God turn us to himself again and again, to become more flexible, more trusting, less focused on ourselves and more focused on God and others. As the old Shaker dancing song puts it, “till by turning, turning, we come round right.”

So I take a new turn in my journey. We all are taking a new turn in our journeys. The world is taking a new turn in its journey. As Pete Seeger sings, in his trope of the old words from Ecclesiastes, “To everything—turn, turn, turn—there is a season.” But for those who have eyes of faith it is always the same turning: away from the cramped confinement of our fearful, controlling selves towards the vastness of God's love embracing. The Shakers sang the song “Simple Gifts” as they danced, literally turning round and round until they came round right. Let's sing that old Shaker hymn together as a pledge of our answer to God's call, a pledge of our ongoing conversion.

Tis the gift to be simple,
 Tis the gift to be free,
 Tis is gift to come down where we out to be,
 And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
 'twill be in the valley of love and delight.
 When true simplicity is gained
 To bow and bend we shan't be ashamed,
 To turn, to turn, will be our delight
 Till by turning, turning we come round right.

Amen!