

### **E3C – EARTH-FRIENDLY CONVERSION:**

A Sermon by Dan Stern, Broadview Community UCC, April 22, 2007  
Conversion of Saul/Paul – Acts 9: 1-9

This year, and during this 50-day Easter season in particular, two of my very favorite parts of the Bible are being featured as the recommended readings for the church – the Gospel of Luke and the Books of Acts. Although Luke and Acts are divided chronologically in the New Testament by the Gospel of John, they were written by the same person – the apostle known to us as Luke; and the two parts – the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles – really do belong together as one continuing narrative.

In my young adult days, I could really relate to the Book of Acts. It seemed a most exciting adventure story. But more – at the time in my life, I was very earnestly trying, with others, to embody what I still today think are the basic values of Jesus' lifestyle – to live simply, to live together, to live peacefully. Peacefully, simply, together – these ways sum up the way that Jesus taught us to live. And the very early church really did live that way. It's perhaps most clearly described at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Book of Acts, where it refers to the early church as having had 'all things in common'. It seemed clear to me in my young adult days that this meant we were supposed to live communally, and we more or less did. And we spoke out rather strongly for peace; and we lived as simply as we knew how, and we shared what wealth we had with each other, and with the poor, refusing to share the part we were expected to give to Uncle Sam to pay for war. We didn't have much, because we earned our way doing farm labor; we lived together in temporary housing for farm workers; we read aloud to each other at night from scripture or from theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer instead of watching TV, we didn't have TVs, and we often traveled by thumb or by boxcar, spending virtually nothing.

We related strongly to the life-transforming, counter-cultural stories contained in The Book of Acts. These stories tell us of Christianity's early counter-cultural origins.

Our passage for this morning is a powerful story about conversion to this way. A most horrific persecutor, Saul, portrayed almost as a Guantanamo-style mercenary, as one who tortured these early followers of the way, is, for three days, struck blind by the light of God. And a voice tells him to stop persecuting these people, and to realize their way could be his way. To this day, I am still rather moved upon hearing dramatic tales of conversion such as these. I once knew a former National Guardsman who, during the Vietnam era, was repeatedly called to duty over against anti-Vietnam War student demonstrators. His conscience – and his reading of scripture – had for some time been telling him that he belonged on the other side. Finally one day, he just lay down his weapon, took of his guard insignia and walked to the demonstrators' side; for a time, he went to prison for doing it, but he never went back to where he'd been before.

Conversion. It can happen in many powerful ways, either gradually or suddenly. It's not about getting saved so much as about being transformed, getting changed, or even falling in love – because conversion is more about be-loving than it is about believing. Conversion means change, transformation, falling in love. But what, exactly, are we being converted from, and to? This of course, depends on whose version of faithful Christian living you're buying into.

Are we converting to a way of life more in keeping with, say, the gospel of Luke? What is Luke's gospel conversion emphasis? Well, here's what Eugene Peterson says in his introduction to the Gospel of Luke:

"Most of us, much of the time, feel left out – misfits. We don't belong./Others seem so confident, so sure of themselves, 'insiders' who know the ropes, old hands in a club from which we are excluded. .../(Institutionalized) religion has a long history of reducing the huge mysteries of God to the respectability of club rules, of shrinking the vast human community to a (club or clique). But with God there are not outsiders, and Luke is (perhaps the) most vigorous champion of the outsider. An outsider himself, the only Gentile in an all-Jewish cast of (early) New Testament writers, he shows how Jesus included those who typically were treated as outsiders by the religious establishment of the day: women, common laborers, the racially different, (the sexually different, the physically impaired, the sick, and) the poor. Luke will not countenance religion as a club (or clique). As he tells the story, all of us who have found ourselves on the outside looking in on life with no hope of gaining entrance (and who of us hasn't felt it?) now find the doors wide open, found and welcomed by God in Jesus." Are we being converted to this kind of religion, this kind of faith community?

And then by way of describing the Acts of the Apostles, Peterson says this: "Because the story of Jesus is so impressive, there is a danger that we will be impressed, but only be impressed. As the spectacular dimensions of this story slowly (or suddenly) dawn upon us, we could easily become enthusiastic spectators, and then let it go at that – become admirers of Jesus, generous with our oohs and ahs, and (only) in our better moments inspired to imitate him. It is Luke's task (in the book of Acts) to prevent us from becoming mere spectators to Jesus, fans of the (Way, but not followers, not doers). Of the original quartet of writers on Jesus, Luke alone continues to tell the story as the (early followers) live it into the next generation. The remarkable thing is that it continues to be essentially the same story. Luke continues his narration with hardly a break. ...The story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who (follow after him). Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God – they are in on the action of God, God acting in them, God living in them. Which also means, of course, in us!"

Is God acting in you today? In you and in me? I may today be living as peacefully as I know how, but I'm not currently refusing war taxes, nor am I living as simply, as much like Jesus or like St. Frances, nor as fully together, as communally as I once tried to do. But to live as Jesus taught, as the early disciples lived it, we do still need to live in this world, in this society, in simple ways, in earth-friendly ways. And though we are free to imagine and hope for a simply beautiful heaven wherein all earth's struggles are finished, and all is joy and peace, in the mean time, earth is our home, and we must bring heaven's joy and peace a bit closer, because all the way to heaven is heaven, the way to peace is to live peacefully, the way to beauty and joy is to be there now. We must be converted here and now to a way, to the way that is simple, that is earth-friendly, that is generous and close and free of empty materialism, that is free from endless self-centered wanting and fearing, that is specific in the ways in which it is earth-friendly. Rather than spell out those ways we at BCUCC are being converted now to an earth-friendly way of following Jesus, I invite you to join in the discussion, the one Pete and Mo have arranged for us, to consider today, this earth day, how we shall live. May we learn well how we shall live, may we know joy and peace in so living as in heaven were here on earth right now. Amen.