

### Converted Again and Again

What perfect texts for the day of your annual meeting! Isaiah is in the temple – just as we are now – and he hears God’s call: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” Peter, James and John hear Jesus preach from a boat, then experience a great catch of fish after a night of empty nets. When Jesus calls them to fish for people, they leave everything to follow him. I don’t know if you’re electing people to leadership positions today but if you are, these texts should surely encourage people to say, “Here am I. I’ll do it!”

Luke’s story of Jesus calling the disciples comes later than the calling stories in Matthew and Mark. In Luke Jesus has already preached in his hometown synagogue. He has healed people including Simon’s mother-in-law. So by the time Jesus gets into Simon Peter’s boat, Jesus is no stranger to Simon or the crowds who have gathered to hear Jesus preach. Simon Peter knew Jesus well enough to lend his boat for a pulpit. I wish we knew what Jesus taught that day, but the text is silent about that. All we know is what happened after the teaching was finished: Jesus told Simon to push out into the deep water and cast out his nets. “Master, we have worked all night long and caught nothing.” Can you hear Simon Peter’s exasperation? He knew these waters far better than the preacher from Nazareth. *We’ve worked all night and caught nothing.* Yet, there’s not even a pause before he answers, “At your word I will let down the nets.” This all seemed to happen in a split second for Peter. But sometimes the split-second turns into almost a lifetime. The net stays in the bottom of the boat. Who knows how the word gets through?

Many years ago I got a phone call from a man I’d never met, a man named Paul. He had heard a sermon I preached on a radio program called “The Protestant Hour” – the program wasn’t just for Protestants and it was only a half hour. Sometimes people came across the program by accident. Paul wanted to know where he could get a copy of my sermon. Well, of course, I was flattered as most preachers are when someone asks for a copy of a sermon. This is especially true when you preach on the radio and

you're not sure if anybody is listening. So I told him where he could get the little booklet of sermons and a couple weeks later, he wrote me a letter. This is part of what he wrote:

When I came to the moment where they recognized Jesus, I broke into uncontrollable sobbing. After I regained my composure, I came back to finish the story, and the same thing happened again. What on earth was happening to me? After an hour of sitting and wondering, I went back to finish the story... Since then, I have gone through the necessary motions of life, but my head and my heart are full of the same questions, endlessly repeated – what has happened? What is happening? What must I do?

I'd like to claim that my sermon was the life-changing force, but something else was going on. My sermon was almost a word for word retelling of the story of Jesus' encounter with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It was the gospel that touched this man. It was Jesus who met him in the story. He went on to tell me a bit about his life, how he had grown up in a Christian home and studied the Bible as a youngster. But Jesus had lost meaning for him over the years. He found it harder and harder to reconcile the Jesus story with a lifetime of study and teaching. In his words, he had decided that Jesus was a "charismatic lunatic."

Now years later, this man had been caught off guard by Jesus. He dared to look again at the Jesus he didn't believe in. This was no small thing. He had spent a good part of his life with a certain picture of Jesus. Right or wrong, he had grown accustomed to keeping Jesus at a distance or as a memory from childhood. It's not a simple matter to consider a whole new way of looking at things! **It may be as disruptive to consider the possibility of faith as it is to consider the possibility of doubt.** Either way, nothing is ever quite the same again.

That retired professor taught me a lot about Simon Peter. He helped me hear that Peter's words are about far more than fishing:

*I fished these waters all night, and I don't expect to catch anything now!  
I gave up believing long ago, and I don't expect to start believing now!*

What convinces a fisherman to throw out his net again after catching nothing all night? What convinces a professor to consider the possibility of believing in Jesus though he had given up on Jesus long ago? They are not such different questions. Both carry the radical expectation of giving up what we have come to count on, to move beyond what our past has defined as “true.” Who knows how the word gets through? A memory from childhood perhaps. A conversation with an old friend. The loss of a job, the death of a spouse, the birth of a child, a feeling of emptiness even in the midst of great success.

Sometimes we call this experience “conversion.” That’s a scary word for many of us, conjuring up images of forced baptisms and once-in-a-lifetime altar calls. But the Bible presents a very different picture. **Conversion happens not once, but again and again, over a lifetime.** For Simon Peter, conversion happened that day in the boat when he knelt at Jesus’ feet and on the shore when he left his boat behind. Conversion happened again after he argued with Jesus about suffering – and got soundly scolded for saying that could never happen. Conversion happened again after Jesus was arrested and Peter denied even knowing Jesus three times.

Conversion happens when you cross the threshold of a church after years away. Or when you’ve never been in any church and you come for the first time -- you don’t know any of the songs or when to stand and when to sit. Conversion also happens when you’ve been a member of this church for many years and hardly ever miss a service. Then one Sunday morning you hear words of a psalm or a hymn, maybe something in the prayers and you sense the presence of God as never before. You cast your net out into the deep. Pastor/novelist Frederick Buechner describes following Jesus this way:

...the voice that we hear over our shoulders never says, “First be sure that your motives are pure and selfless and then follow me.” If it did, then we could none of us follow...

We want to know who Jesus is before we follow him, and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is. (Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*)

Soon we will sing Jesus' invitation in the words of Scottish hymnwriter John Bell. Even after fishing all night, even after a lifetime dismissing Jesus, we hear a question that won't let us go...

**Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?**

**Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?**

**Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known?**

**Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?**

(Text by John Bell, *ELW hymn 798*)

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