

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 11, 2016

“Conversion”

Scripture: 1 Timothy 1:12-17; 15 Pentecost C (Proper 19)

I think I met the apostle Paul once. I'm not entirely sure. The man I met was kind and gregarious; gentle with his words, but firm, unwavering in his convictions. He had no trouble giving credit where credit was due; it was not himself responsible for his success, his well-being, his beautiful family, even his very life. No this man was quick to credit a higher power, to recognize that all he had become was because of God, a God he had heard about as a youth, but met heart to heart as an adult. The man I met was an insurance guy, owned a brokerage, ran his own business and supported employees. His name wasn't Paul, but there was something about him...

I met this person at weekend retreat for men and women whose lives had been affected by the AIDS virus. He was there to comfort them, to teach them, to support them. He was there to tell them about the power of Jesus Christ to redeem their lives and help them find meaning and purpose again. He was there to build up the church and call new disciples to Christ. That seemed a lot like the apostle Paul to me. But there's more.

On his way to being where he was at this retreat, this apostle had taken many detours. A successful high school athlete who even made his way into the pros, he found that life was too shallow and meaningless for him. He tried to follow the rules and found they weren't written for him. With only modest athletic talent, he couldn't get ahead. He grew angry with the sport, the church, his family, and his life. He turned to excess, to drugs and money, and finally, one night, he held a gun to the head of another man, demanded his money or his life... and he didn't get the money. It was in jail that he contracted the AIDS virus himself, sharing needles with other inmates who found ways to nurture their drug habits even while incarcerated.

Yes, you heard me right. This man I met at the retreat, this apostle of Jesus Christ, was not a weekend presenter or a chaplain like me; he was a participant, and he was dying with AIDS. Yet, he was living with AIDS. And though he could have come to the retreat only to sooth his own wounded self, he did not. He was one of the most delightful, friendly, grateful, thankful, and generous people there. He was there to serve others, to share a redeeming and healing power he knew in Jesus Christ, and my life is better because, for a little while, I came to know him.

The apostle, Paul? Not exactly, but let me tell you what I see in this man. I see a man filled with the love and faith of Jesus Christ, a man who knows that without the

strength and forgiveness and acceptance of God, he would be of little account; a man who was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and, above all, a man of violence. Just like Paul.

How easy it is to sanitize the love and power of Christ, to forget that our ancient of the faith are sometimes, maybe often, people we would have nothing to do with today. Paul, doing what he thought was right, blasphemed the love of God, sought to serve his own interests, and became a killer. Paul persecuted the early church and was responsible for the death of these new Christians before he himself was overwhelmed by the love of God and changed forever.

The apostle Paul and my friend were men of violence, blasphemers and persecutors until they shared a common experience: a *conversion* to love in the power of Jesus Christ. Kenny, as I saw him at that retreat, was every bit the apostle that Paul had been, traveling from place to place to build up Christians and the church, ministering in his community, telling of his past and his gracious conversion to Christ, living with his own thorn in the flesh, healing and comforting those who suffered and giving thanks and honor to "...the King of the ages, immortal, invisible," ...God only wise. Is this the same man who, in his earlier days, was a killer and of no account? Yes! And no. Kenny was all he had ever been, but now he was something more. He was forgiven and resurrected from the dead in the power of Jesus. And though he

could not undo the pain he had caused or endured, he had become a living, breathing manifestation of the power of the living Christ to change us for good.

At some level, don't we all need to be touched by that power of change and reconciliation? God help us, we don't all walk down the same dark road as Paul or as Kenny, yet we come in contact with the sin of the world every day. We hear endless reports in the news of this killing and that tragedy, and this war and that act of terror. And we try to walk a straight line, live a decent life, not be overwhelmed by all the evil around us; we try to be good. But I don't know if it's so much that God really wants us to be good for our own sake, so as much as God wants us to be *converted* to a life of faithfulness and gratitude and service and love for the sake of others. You know what I think the challenge is for us contemporary Christians in our time in the U.S.A.? Just to be the church we are called to be. That means caring about what is happening the world around us, praying for its healing, serving those in need, healing the sick, lifting up the broken, acting wherever possible for the sake of justice.

The power of Jesus Christ is the power to take whatever we are and whatever we have and use it for the reconciliation of all that is fallen in this world; that is at the heart of our hope in the Resurrection from the Dead. Jesus brings life from death and calls us to be his vessels of that work.