

Message for May 15, 2022

Acts 9:1-9

If historians were asked what the most important event in the year 1809 was, most would say that it was the Battle of Wagram. That battle was a huge one and was fought between the Austrians and the French, led by Napoleon Bonaparte. The result was a decisive French victory that cemented Napoleon's control of Europe for another six years. This, according to most historians, is *the* event in 1809 but I am not so sure. In that same year a Frenchman named Nicolas Appert invented something that I would say was of far greater importance. And what was Appert's discovery?

He discovered how to can food safely. Now this may not sound like a big deal to us, but his discovery changed the course of history. Back then there was no refrigeration or freezing of food. The only way that meat and fish could be preserved was by either smoking it or salting it. And there was absolutely no way of storing food such as fruits and vegetables for any length of time either. The result was that hunger was always a possibility, much of the food could only be eaten in season, and people had to live close to their food supply. With the invention of canning however, food could now be stored safely and transported over long distances. This enabled cities to grow and resulted in economic growth. Canning also enabled the explorers to travel further and helped lead to the export of Western values throughout the world. Appert's invention attracted little attention at the time, but it was a pivotal event in the history of the world; things would never be the same again. Such was the impact of the event described in today's scripture passage as well.

Today's passage describes the conversion of Paul. Saul, as he was called at the time, hated Christianity with a passion and thought that it was his God-given mission to rid the world of all its Christians. Paul for example encouraged the mob to kill Stephen, the very first Christian martyr. Paul made life so miserable for the Christians in Jerusalem that many of them fled to Damascus. Not content with his work in Jerusalem, Paul then got permission to go to Damascus to persecute the Christians there.

As Paul approached the city something very strange happened. He was literally blinded by an incredibly bright light and then heard the voice of Jesus

himself saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Overwhelmed by this experience, Paul went from being the great persecutor of the church to its greatest supporter. In fact the profound influence of Paul lives on today as he is the author of most of what we call the New Testament. Truly while no one realized it at the time, the conversion of Paul was one of history’s quiet yet decisive turning points. Having said that though, the story of Paul’s conversion certainly hasn’t lost any of its popularity down through the years and it is not hard to see why. The conversion of Paul after all is a tremendous story of hope. If Paul could repent and turn his life around, then anyone can! If there was hope for Paul, then there is hope for everyone!

This is something that we want to and even sometimes need to hear. This in fact is how most people understand today’s scripture passage, as a tremendous message of hope. Then however, starting a couple of hundred years ago, some people started understanding today’s passage in another way. They said that in order to be a ‘real’ or ‘true’ Christian, one *had* to have had a special conversion experience just like Paul. If one didn’t then their Christianity was called into question. One person who shared this belief was John Newton who wrote the influential hymn “Amazing Grace”.

Newton was the captain of a ship that transported slaves from Africa to the New World in the most appalling and degrading conditions imaginable, but he didn’t care. Then one day while caught in a tremendous storm at sea, Newton had a special spiritual experience. Overwhelmed by it, Newton left the slave trade and eventually became an Anglican priest. He alluded to his conversion experience in his hymn “Amazing Grace” when he wrote, “How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed!”

No one should doubt Newton’s experience and how God chose to work in his life. It does not follow however that this is how God does or even *must* work in everyone else’s life; that if a person cannot point to the time and place that they first believed, then they are not a ‘real’ Christian. This insistence however has led to a lot of unnecessary hurt and anger.

There was once a young Presbyterian minister who went to visit an elderly woman in his congregation. The minister firmly believed that if a person did not have some sort of special spiritual experience, then that person was not a true Christian. The minister wanted to know when the woman had been born again and her reply was to say that she had never had such an experience. Even so,

she said that she had been baptized, attended church all her life and tried to follow Christ's teaching and example. She added that there had never been a time when God and Christ had not been a part of her life. Her minister though told her that that was not good enough and that he would pray for her. Perhaps needless to say, she felt both angry and hurt by his comments, but the irony of all of this is that that minister ignored the teaching of his own Presbyterian tradition.

There can be no doubt that God can and does sometimes grant people special spiritual experiences. A person however does not become a Christian at the time of a special spiritual experience; rather a person becomes a Christian when they are baptized. No matter how young or old a person may be when they are baptized, it is then that they are born again of water and the Spirit and given the gifts of the Spirit. Why even Paul himself did not become a Christian until he was baptized by Ananias days after his special experience! All of us are by virtue of our baptism born again, but of course being baptized is just the start. To use an analogy, a child is not just physically born and that is it; the child must be nurtured and cared for as he or she grows from being a baby to a toddler to a child to a teenager and then to an adult. The physical birth is just the beginning, and so it is with us spiritually as well.

Ethan was baptized this morning, but that was just the beginning of his spiritual journey. The seed of faith was planted but, like a physical seed, it must be nurtured and cared for if it is to take root, flourish and grow. The seed of faith is nurtured by the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, as well as by the church family of which the child is a part. And when we are older, we nurture our own faith through such as worship, prayer, the books we read and the music we listen to. Through all of this and more, our faith grows and matures. This is one of the reasons why I find baptisms so special. The baptism is a child's spiritual birth and the formal start of their spiritual journey, and every time I celebrate this sacrament, I marvel at the child's potential and wonder what the child will grow up to be like; what God will accomplish in that person's life.

The conversion of Paul truly was one of history's quiet turning points but such was its impact that it has led some to say that unless a person has a special experience such as his, that person is not really a Christian. The truth however is that just like Paul, one becomes a Christian when they are baptized. It is then that we are born of water and the Spirit. It is then that we are born

again. Have we ever had a special spiritual experience? Maybe, maybe not. Are we born again Christians? Absolutely! By virtue of our baptism, being born again and being a Christian are one and the same thing. We can't have one without the other.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, as we come to you in prayer, we thank you for the gift of this day. We thank you for the goodness and beauty of your creation this spring morning. We thank you that we are here as a part of your good creation. We thank you too for the lives of all who are so dear to us.

We thank you this day for the life that comes to us through your Son; his teaching, example, death and resurrection. We thank you for your call to us to be your Son's disciples, and for the purpose and meaning that that gives to our lives. We confess that there are times on life's journey when we may feel that our lives are aimless and of little value or purpose. Help us to remember that our being here at this place and at this time is not just a fluke of nature; that you have placed us here and now for your own good reasons and that by doing so you give all of our lives value, purpose and meaning.

As we celebrated the Sacrament of Baptism this morning, we pray for all who do not realize that they have been baptized or have abandoned the spiritual journey that began with their baptism. Help us we pray to remember that even when we forget about you, you never forget about us.

We pray this day for the sake of healing in the lives of all those who are ill, whether it be in mind, body, or soul. We pray for peace and strength for all those who grieve, those who grieve for the loss of a loved one and those who grieve for the past with its mistakes and regrets. Help us to remember that one of the great promises of the gospel is that what is, is not what must be.

As we so often have, we again offer up our prayer for the sake of the people in Ukraine as the war and resulting upheaval and suffering continue. Truly may your will be done there, and everywhere, just as it is done in heaven.

Looking ahead to the long holiday weekend which will mark a welcome break for so many people, we pray for the safety and well-being of all. We pray too for our province as the election campaign continues, giving you thanks for the freedom to elect those who govern us.

In your Son's name we pray. Amen