

Why Bother

Mary Anderson, Youth Ministry Team Leader

Scripture: Genesis 1:27-31, Matthew 6:7-21, Acts 9:10-19

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Today is the day that we have set aside to honor and commission our graduating seniors. The members of this youth group are leaving a big footprint in this church and even more importantly, in God's kingdom. Some have been attending Sunday school since they were very young. Many have asked probing questions in various Bible studies and at Logos. Others have planned worship services and taught Sunday school. Others have transformed a daycare in La Mision as they learned to drywall finish, clean, paint, build, create a 50 foot mural and develop friendships with the adults and children at Open Arms. Some have walked the streets of Skid Row, served 700 meals, read scripture in a worship service and prayed for the homeless. When I answered this particular call to ministry, no one told me that there would be days like this. I have experienced the very best in these young people. The members of the youth team and many in this congregation know just how special these graduates are.

In some ways, as Youth Ministry Team Leader, I feel as if this is my last opportunity (although it's not true) to speak to this group about why we bother about many things in our journey as Christians. Why we bother with church? Why we bother with prayer? Why we bother to study scripture? Why we bother to follow a Christian path in a pluralistic world with so many other choices and distractions? It's not my last chance, because we will always be a faith family to these young adults, but many are venturing out into new territory.

I believe, in many ways, that God has opened my heart to teenagers because it is my greatest hope and prayer that they don't take as long as I did to find their way back home to God – or ideally never leave. Fortunately, it is not entirely up to us to carry our faith forward into the next generation. The Holy Spirit taps many on the shoulder as well. Many have heard God's call a lot quicker than I did and I will attempt to

explain how their lives were transformed.

I would love to share with you four of my favorite conversion stories. Often you hear the word "conversion" thrown around in conversation as if it were something that is easily attainable. In fact, it appears to be the after effect of much discipline, study and commitment. Here are few of the stories that I find remarkable. Listen carefully and perhaps you will hear why these people "bother" to commit to a Christian way of life. The chemists among us are invited to think about what kind of conversion has occurred? What is different? What has changed?

On our most recent trip to Open Arms Daycare in La Mision, Baja California over Memorial Day, I asked Daniel, the director, if he would mind telling some aspect of his faith story to our group. He explained the details of his early childhood quite matter-of-factly. It is always clear that he does not desire to be pitied. He said that when they were very young, he and his three brothers and three sisters lived with their parents in a shack. Some of you heard this part of the story last year. His sisters were older than Daniel, but at age 5, he was the oldest of the boys. He explained that at times his parents would be gone for many days at a time looking for work. Daniel and his brothers would go to the neighbor's well to fill his 4 month old brother's bottle with water. They would then add sugar and shake it up. He said that was all that they could think of to do. One day, they were playing near a police station and some policemen followed the children home and boarded up the shack with Daniel and his siblings inside until the next day when they could come and get them. For the next few years, the children were shuffled around to various orphanages until they landed at a Christian facility where the boys grew up. The older girls left the premises and no one has seen them ever since. Daniel said by age nine, a woman at the orphanage asked him if he would like to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He

said that when he did receive Christ, nothing major happened – no fireworks. Pointing to his throat, he said that he did however experience a melting away of the past. My eyes began to well up when I thought about what that little boy had been through. Under his breath Daniel muttered, I guess that I hadn't spoken for a couple of years. Daniel's story of conversion continued through the years, but that day marked the beginning of change. Today Daniel is an unstoppable servant of the Lord. He is full of love for his wife and daughter and the 33 other children at Open Arms – and if I had to guess, it's not going to stop there. He lives to serve God and in the process serves others as well. We might say that Daniel is on fire. He is fun, funny and appears to be moving mountains that get in the way of helping families stay together as he and Heidi, his wife, make more and more disciples of Christ. Heidi has a conversion story of her own. She grew up in a religious family in Visalia, California. According to Heidi, when she got to UCSB, she was not practicing a Christian lifestyle. She studied Spanish and lived in Barcelona for a year in order to make a lot of money with her knowledge of Spanish. After her college graduation, she travelled with her parents to the orphanage where Daniel had grown up and was now working. During this visit, she heard God's call to move to this orphanage for a year and volunteer as a house mother to the orphans. She sold her Mustang that she had dreamed about for many years and headed to Baja. To hear Heidi tell the story, she couldn't bear to watch the mothers drop off their children because they were unable to feed them. She said that it broke her heart - a specific type of conversion. We know that God harden Pharaoh's heart, but He also breaks them open. She extended her mission by another year and when that period ended, she was engaged to Daniel. Heidi is the second warrior for God of the four. I admit that I was slightly worried about how she would juggle a new baby while she cared for 33 other children. What I had left out of the formula was the fact that they live in a Christian community with many hands working for a common purpose, not unlike our church, but we have to leave the premises more often. A woman stopped Heidi in the market recently and said that it was clear that her daughter, Samaria, is greatly loved. For the third story of conversion, we need to travel back a few thousand years. I admit that I am fascinated

by Paul's conversion story in chapter 9 of the Book of Acts.

We come upon Paul (still called Saul) of Tarsus shortly after his famous road to Damascus experience. Here are a few details of what had just transpired. According to scripture, Saul had been breathing murderous threats against the disciples of Jesus. He had applied for letters from the synogogue in Damascus authorizing him to arrest any men or women who were followers of the new way. While travelling on the road with other men, he was stopped in his tracks by a light from the sky that flashed all around him. Saul then fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 'Tell me Lord, Saul said, 'who you are.' The voice answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But now get up and you will be told what you have to do.' When Saul got up, he realized that he could no longer see and the men that he was travelling with led him by the hand into Damascus. He was blind for three days and took no food or drink.

So Ananias, in an incredible act of bravery, enters the house where Saul is staying and immediately lays hands on the man most feared by the disciples of Jesus. And as if this isn't enough, Ananias calls Saul 'brother'. Saul regains his sight and is filled with the Holy Spirit. There is so much to this story, but the detail that jumped out at me several years ago and continues to fascinate me today is the following: "Immediately it was as if scales had fallen from his eyes and he regained his sight." "It was as if scales had fallen from his eyes" ?? It seems to be only his eyes that were affected. The healing that he received changed his ability to "see". Judging from the accomplishments in the years that followed, Paul was able to see farther than he had before. He was able to see beyond his own people – to people that he had formerly believed to be unworthy of God's love. Paul learned to "see" potential in other human beings as he put on the "eyes of God".

This is a vivid description of a four day period in the life of probably one of the most influential disciples of Jesus that the world has ever known. After the scales fell from his eyes, he then proceeds to travel thousands of miles to Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, Crete and Rome bringing the Gospel message, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. He establishes several churches often in the face of

danger until he is finally taken as a prisoner to Rome. He writes letters of encouragement and support that now comprise close to half of the New Testament. I, like millions before me and long after I am gone, have been and will continue to be, in awe of Paul. Along with Paul's encounter with Jesus, his healing and baptism, I believe that it was necessary for the scales to fall from his eyes before he was able to see clearly – to know that no one is barred from the Good News.

The last story of conversion needs the disclaimer of “don't try this at home, folks”. It involves a modern day Jesuit Priest named Father Greg Boyle. Over the last five years, I have marvelled at his story. Growing up in large Catholic family in Hancock Park, a wealthy area of Los Angeles, Greg Boyle's mother said that he always had a knack for finding dead birds and they would have to have a big burial in the backyard. His neighbor said that she always knew that he would be a priest. He was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1984. After serving for one summer, he was sent to Bolivia to work with the poor. He says that this was where he received his conversion. He says that he saw the Good News of Jesus Christ in the poor. To hear his story, he will tell you that he felt evangelized by them. Upon returning to Los Angeles, he requested the poorest diocese in the county – the Dolores Mission in the center of the Pico/Aliso housing project – the largest housing project west of the Mississippi. In a 16 square mile area, it was home to 60 gangs and 10, 000 gang members. He buried his first gang member in 1988. By the early 90's, this area of Boyle Heights experienced the most gang violence ever in recorded history. Father Greg rode his bike through the neighborhoods at night talking with the various gangs to learn more about them. Sometimes he broke up fights. Several times, as he was talking to one gang, enemies would creep up and open fire. As more and more gang members were killed by warring neighborhood gangs, politicians lobbied to build more prisons. Father Greg looked for jobs instead. He gained access to juvenile hall to build their trust. As time went on, G Dog, as the gang members called him, began to find jobs and he started a school. A father figure that was so desperately needed walked the streets. Today he has helped to rehabilitate countless gang members. He has taught mothers how to disarm their sons. He started a bakery, a restaurant, a construction business, graffiti clean-up

and a cleaning service. These former gang members see him as a living angel. It's difficult to know exactly what Father G experienced in Bolivia, but I am able to describe the after effects. Living in the midst of the most dangerous area of L.A., he has a very calm and peaceful demeanor. His speech is clear. He can be stern with the kids in his program, and yet he smiles and laughs easily. He appears to suffer deeply with each new tragedy, and yet he has access to tremendous fortitude.

So what has been converted? I am guessing, based on the behavior of these four giants of the Christian faith, that all of their fear has been converted to love. Any therapist will tell you that hatred is not a primary emotion – instead it is fear. Jesus reminds us to have no fear because he is with us always. I guess this is really possible.

And why do I “bother”? I bother to give my allegiance to Christ's church for many reasons, but in closing, if I have to pick one, I would say that I “bother” to study scripture in order to remember who I am - mostly because I'm forgetful. Our culture subtly tells us that we, humans, are not good and that we are hell bent on destroying ourselves. Although newspapers are important and serve a purpose, some articles have a tendency to keep us in fear. If they provide our only daily diet, life can appear quite dark after awhile.

In God's story, in the first chapter of Genesis, we are reminded that we are created in God's image, male and female, and He said that we are very good. This goodness, however is not discovered by delving into self-examination, but rather self-discovery in the Christian sense, involves loosing our will into the will of God and becoming His servants. If we listen well, He will give us many assignments which more than likely will involve loving our neighbors. Ask Conley Kipp what she learned about herself in the process of organizing a volleyball clinic for 25 women in a drug and alcohol recovery program, many of whom had only been off the streets for only 30 days, at the Ann Douglas Center on Skid Row. As we love our neighbors, it is Father Boyle's hope that our circle of inclusion will get so big that it finally will reach and spread to include everyone. No one will be left out. It was Plato, the Greek philosopher that taught us that our bodies as well as this world is corrupt. He went on to say that a disembodied soul will leave this place when we die. This is the belief that many Christians

still hold onto although this idea does not exist in scripture. In the New Testament, the word soul refers to the personality. The biblical God has promised to not forsake us or to turn His back on creation. As we hear in the Sermon on the Mount in chapter six of the Book of Matthew, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells us to pray for God's will to enter into this realm, not the other way around. He tells us to store up our treasures in heaven while we are alive, not when we're dead. He promises to be our God through world-wide financial crisis, loss of work, global warming and universe cooling. His kingdom will have no end and His hand is outstretched to welcome us in every moment of every day. We need only to respond to the invitation. And lastly, I need to remember, according to Paul, and I know that Katie Fisher will agree, that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ Jesus.