

SERMON PREACHED AT 8AM AND 10AM SERVICES

Today we are deviating from the common lectionary to observe the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, our patron, the saint for whom this community is named. Paul's feast day falls on January 25, and it seems very appropriate to mark it on the day of our Annual Parish Meeting.

Most of us are probably familiar with the outline of Paul's story, if not the details. Paul was an actual historical figure, and his life is told in the Book of Acts and in his own letters. He was born a Jew, named Saul. He held Roman citizenship by birth, which gave him certain civil rights. He was also a Pharisee, a member of the sect that tried to strictly follow all of the Levitical codes, living a life that reflected an obedient relationship with the God of Israel. Saul was clearly a man of passion, carrying out what he perceived as his call to the very best of his abilities. Today's first reading tells us that Paul had been authorized by the chief priests to root the followers of Jesus out of the synagogues. Christianity had not yet separated from Judaism, but was still a movement within it. When the writer of Acts says that "the Jews" seized Paul and tried to kill him, Paul may have been seized by some Jews who did not follow Jesus, who were doing what he had done earlier in his life, but the situation cannot and should not be reduced to a case of the bad Jews versus the good Christians.

So, anyway, here is Saul, imprisoning followers of Jesus, condemning them to death, and even pursuing them to foreign cities like some kind of first century bounty hunter. Then the resurrected Jesus appeared to him and changed him - converted him - him from a persecutor of followers into one of the most successful evangelists of all time - and in the process changed his name from Saul to Paul. Paul, still the faithful Jew, was called to preach the Gospel to Gentiles, and he spread the Good News of repentance and forgiveness all around the Mediterranean. At the end of each of the four gospels, before his Ascension into heaven, the resurrected Jesus gives the disciples a commission, their instructions for what to do next. His commission is very similar to what he told Paul on the road to Damascus. They are to teach what he has taught them, preach change of heart and life and forgiveness of sins and they are to do this to all nations, all people. It's important to remember that Jesus says this to a very small group of men and women, members of a marginalized ethnic group living under the thumb of the great Roman Empire. The fact that we're sitting here today is, for me, incredibly strong evidence of the truth of the Gospel and its power to change lives. There is a real historical question here: How did the disciples, none of whom had any power of any kind in their society, who ran when Jesus was arrested, who hid while he was crucified, manage to establish a religion that today has more members than any other? How is that possible? Paul played a huge role. His story makes a very effective witness and he was a tireless organizer and overseer of communities of followers. He also was the church's first theologian. His writings, particularly the Letter to the Romans, laid the intellectual groundwork for centuries of scholarly work. Our patron was a brilliant, passionate, effective leader.

Right now, the children in Sunday School are learning a little early church history. They are viewing a DVD series called *The Story Keepers*, about a group of Christians in Rome in the year 64. It was the time of the Emperor Nero, and Nero had it out for Christians. Tradition holds that it was in Rome, under Nero that Paul was crucified. We know that early Christians were persecuted, by establishment Jewish leaders (like Saul) and by the Roman civil authorities, because they tended to stir up trouble and they refused to worship the Emperor. But most of us

are not all that familiar with how we got from those earliest days to here, from ragtag small groups meeting in secret to dedicated buildings and ordained ministers – along with stewardship drives to pay for it all. One night, as part of a Lenten study series a couple of years ago, I breathlessly told the history of the church, how the Gospel traveled from Jesus to Riverside Connecticut and St. Paul's Church. I can't do that again now, but I do want to talk about history for a moment.

In the great 2000 year arc of modern western history, it seems that about every 500 years, society goes through a major transformation of some kind. And the Church, being part and parcel of western civilization, is subject to this same pattern. Bishop Mark Dyer, who teaches at Virginia Theological Seminary, puts it this way. He says that about every five hundred years, the Church feels compelled to have a Rummage Sale. It goes through a time of clearing out all the things it has accumulated that have become of no or little use. Five hundred years after Jesus, the Church had to figure out how to structure itself after the fall of the Roman Empire, because, thanks to the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the 300's, the Empire and the Church were pretty much one institution. This eventually led to the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, now known as the Pope. After another five hundred years passed, the Great Schism occurred. The Church split for the first time - into an eastern Greek-speaking branch and a western Latin-speaking branch, largely due to issues of theology and ecclesiastical authority, with politics playing no small role. Constantinople, today's Istanbul, became the locus of what is now the Eastern Orthodox Church and the western church became the Roman Catholic Church. This corresponded with the beginning of the High Middle Ages in Europe. Then, of course, about 500 years later, in the 1500's, we have the Reformation. Martin Luther gets a lot of credit, but the Renaissance provided the culture in which Luther was formed. The western church split again, into Roman Catholic and Protestants. Because of its inherent nature, Protestantism in turn kept shooting off new forms, including the Church of England, from whom the Episcopal Church later separated. New Protestant churches continue to spring up around the world today. I apologize to any professional historians among us, because there are of course a lot of pieces to this huge moving puzzle, but I am trying to get us here today.

Following the pattern then, western civilization today finds itself in the midst of another upheaval – and the Church is in the middle of another Rummage Sale, which you may have noticed, even if you did not know what to call it. These 500 year upheavals occur across every area of life: culture, politics, economics, etc. Those of us in the midst of the current disruption can look back and see where we've been, but no one can say with any accuracy where we're going. Author and teacher Phyllis Tickle reminds us that the historical record provides some consolation. First, the actual institutions themselves, while undergoing drastic change, do not cease to exist: the Church and the state continue on; and for the Church, there always follows some type of resurgence in the spreading of the faith once we've gotten through the change. And second, Tickle points out, we are dealing with the very same question that has arisen every 500 years, and that has always eventually been answered, and that is: Who or what is the source of authority? Who gets to make the rules?

It's clear to me that one of the items going in the Rummage Sale this time around is being part of the dominant culture. I think St. Paul – and Jesus himself – would be okay with that. But other than our commission to spread the Good news of change of life and heart and forgiveness of sins, everything else about what it means to live as a follower of Jesus seems to be on the table, and it's impossible to know what will remain. So, how do we live in this time that we did not choose and that we feel unprepared for? It's okay to mourn what we've lost, what is over

and is never coming back, but since we are a community of Good News, we cannot stay in mourning. We could try to just keep going the way we always have as long as possible, avoid dealing with what's going on, hoping that we die or retire before it really affects us. But I don't think that is a very faithful response either. By virtue of our baptism, we have been called to participate in God's work of change, of transforming the world into something new, a reconciled, healed and whole reality. We have to look towards the future that has been promised to us, bought at a price for us by Jesus Christ. And we have to discern God's call for how we are to move faithfully in that general direction. I have no idea exactly what our future looks like, but I do believe we have a direction. Rather than trying to resuscitate whatever is dying, or put our heads in the sand, we can look at what is working well, what is life-giving, and figure out what those things need in order to grow and flourish. As people have done for 2000 years, we can continue to praise and worship the God of love and life: the God who called the disciples to go out and spread the Good News, the God who turned Saul around so hard and fast that his very name was changed, the God who feeds us every Sunday at this table. We can't be perfect and we won't always be right, but the Gospel allows for that. Its basic message, of transformation based on forgiveness, gives us encouragement and empowerment to take risks. So, let us help each other to be open and nimble, bold and innovative, brave and creative. Let us remember who we are - and whose we are. And, let us embrace (rather than fight) change. It's here and more is coming. Change is part of our DNA. We are, after all, St. Paul's Church. Amen.

ADDRESS GIVEN AT ANNUAL MEETING

Our Annual Report provides lots of information about 2011, and there is lots of good news to be found. Our children's, youth and adult education programs all grew significantly; our worship attendance was up, and we had a net gain of 10 new members – the first net increase in many years (in 2010 we stopped the loss, but stayed exactly the same). More than half of our pledges for 2012 showed increases over 2011. We have a lot to be proud of and grateful for.

2012 holds much promise for more growth. It also promises some significant changes. We just elected two new wardens – the first complete turnover in those jobs since I arrived. Jim is actively seeking to become a rector, which is another sign of our success: We have prepared him well for that move. Amy returns from maternity leave on February 26 and will move with her family to Boston in June, which means we'll have a new person in that role next fall. She has laid the groundwork for us to continue to move forward, with the help and involvement of many adults, and I know we can do that. I want to assure you that I was very systematic and intentional in my calling of Jim as our curate, interviewing more than a dozen candidates, and I am ready to begin that process again. If the right person cannot be found in Connecticut or New York, I am prepared to go to Virginia Seminary in Alexandria and interview more candidates there. But until Jim has a place to go, I cannot really get started on that. I think our Director of Children's Ministries position is very attractive for those in that field, thanks in part to the involvement and support of so many families, the vestry and the clergy. In March, I will begin to advertise and network with colleagues for possible candidates.

I gave you the big picture of where we – the Church – are today in my sermon. I said I really don't know what the future of the Church is, what role it will play in the world. But I do know that Christianity is no longer a part of dominant, popular western culture. We cannot assume that our children will learn who Jesus is, will learn to pray, will learn the great narrative

of salvation history, the counter narrative to the death-dealing one told by the popular culture, any place other than here. We cannot assume that adults, my age and younger, who grew up during the beginning of the upheaval we are now in the midst of, know any of those things either. And we cannot assume that those of you who are older, who remember the time when being a Christian and going to church was just something everyone did, were necessarily part of communities who sought to teach and learn those things in life-forming and life-changing ways.

This is why I think that Christian formation needs to be an absolute priority for us. We use the word formation rather than education because education does not quite capture our purpose. We are not just trying to teach skills or impart information. We are trying to become a community of faithful people, equipped to live the transformational message of the Gospel in a world that does not know it - and has never needed it more. I don't care if our children grow up and go to church the way we do. I am not worried about the future of the Church. It is a holy thing, called into being and empowered by God, and if God wants it to continue and to grow, it will. I do want our children to know what it means to follow Jesus Christ and to be able to do it if they choose. I want our teens to know what they believe, what they put their hope and trust in, and why. I want all of us to know that, no matter what the world may tell us, even if it says that we are losers, that we are not good enough; no matter what happens in our lives: divorce, job loss, illness, we are beloved children of God; we have gifts that can make a positive difference in the world; and we know that the ultimate outcome of healing and salvation for all is assured because it is in the hands of a loving faithful God. I want us equipped to share the meaning and the hope that lie at the heart of the Gospel, because those things cannot be found anywhere else. That means we need to know the story of God and God's people, the whole Bible narrative. That means we need to learn to pray and to practice prayer. And that means we need to worship as if we mean it, as if God is worthy of our time, our praise and our attention. And that means that every Sunday we must very intentionally look for and welcome guests and newcomers, those who have heard we might have something of value here, and who, against increasing odds and an increasing variety of obstacles, come to see who we are and what we do, who Jesus is and what kind of difference knowing him makes in our lives.

This is a stressful time, brothers and sisters, but it's also an exciting one. Let us move into our future not with anxiety and fear, but with faith and trust and hope. God is not going anywhere. Or, maybe I should say, wherever it is that God is going, we have been invited to go too. I hope that we can be bold enough and brave enough to accept that generous invitation. Amen.