

ST STEPHEN'S EAST DELTA UNITED CHURCH  
May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, The Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Reverend Doug Graves

### ON BEING "BORN AGAIN"

Readings: Acts 9:1-20 and John 21:1-19

In choosing the title for this sermon, I noticed that I've never before preached a "born again" sermon from this pulpit. Like "sin" which I spoke about two weeks ago, it's obviously a subject I tend to avoid.

(1)It's language, quite frankly, that makes many of us mainline Protestants a little nervous. And not without reason. "Born Again" is too often synonymous with "narrow minded". And I suspect that all of us can think of people who use their newfound religious faith as a bludgeon.

I suspect further that being United Church makes us especially vulnerable to overly zealous folk. We were, after all, one of the first churches to ordain women. And we welcomed and supported those who were divorced, even ordained them into positions of leadership. And more than 20 years ago we did the same with openly gay people, and followed that up a few years ago by agreeing to marry them. All of which has made us real targets for "real" Christians.

The writer Kathleen Norris, writing about conversion, has a warning for those zealous folk, and, needless to say, for us too:

*"If conversion serves us a bit too well," she writes "If it reinforces all our prejudices and allows us to call ourselves holy at the expense of others whom we can now judge unholy, it is probably not the real thing."*

And yet there must be some validity to being born again, some value, some realness, for we've already heard this morning two very dramatic stories that can only be described as "born again" stories.

What makes them real?

Could it be the drama that makes it real? I certainly hope not, for I have never personally experienced such drama. My own experience, in fact, is much closer to that of the writer who likens her being born again to a flower unfolding petal by petal over days: *"How then," she writes "can you mark the precise moment at which the bud 'converts' to being a flower?"*

For some of us, conversion is a matter of being jerked, grabbed, and jolted. For others, it is gradually being enticed through a long series of experiences, some joyful, some painful, toward the kingdom. Each and every one of us has a different story of faith because God doesn't speak to every single one of us in the same way. Instead, God calls to us individually in ways that are appropriate to our own lives.

That's the beauty of it. God's love knows our personal needs and steps forth to meet them. Sometimes it knocks us to the ground and sometimes it doesn't.

(2) But back to our New Testament stories...

Here is a man who is angry. He puts on camouflage; he trains in weapons and self-defence. He calls together his troops. Here is a man who kicks in doors, dragging men and women out of their homes, throwing them in jail to await the predictable verdict of a kangaroo court.

No, this man is not a member of the International Sikh Youth Federation parading in Surrey, or a psychotic and delusional killer at Virginia Tech who killed 32, or even a suicide bomber who killed 100 the same day in Iraq.

The name of the man is Saul. He lived in Jerusalem about 2000 years ago. We don't know why he was so angry. Why does anyone burn so fiercely inside that he takes to guns and bombs and paramilitary training? But angry Saul was — enraged at an obscure little group of Jews who called themselves "The Way." This little group claimed to have found the Messiah in a crucified Galilean peasant who they said was still alive.

Many people choose to hang onto their anger because, quite honestly, anger works. Anger protects them by keeping people away and controlling how others treat them. But eventually anger stops working. And at that point something drastic needs to happen.

Here is another man who is filled with shame. He gave up everything to follow a new revolutionary leader who would free the people. The occupying foreign power with their army would be gone. The puppet rulers they had put in place would be replaced. There would be a new nation where the poor would be blessed, the hungry fed, the naked clothed. They arrested the one he followed. There was a mock trial. An execution. Three times he was pointed out as a follower. He denied knowing him three times...and here he is by the lakeshore, eating breakfast with them. The One looks at him and asks, "Peter do you love me?" Not once, not twice, but three times. He had been so confident and now there is only shame.

Shame is a feeling of being defective and worthless. It's having the sense that you are "damaged goods" and therefore good for nothing. The shamed person lives in fear of their defects being exposed and then enduring the humiliation of that exposure. Shame often leads to depression because people feel like they will never find success, and this in turn leads to anger — anger at your condition and anger at anyone who may have helped contribute to it.

For Paul and Peter something happened to dispel anger and shame. I know from listening to stories of people gathered here this morning that the same thing has happened in our lives. The Bible calls it grace. The sudden awareness that we are loved by God. It is not earned or deserved—it simply is.

Paul Tillich had this to say about it:

*“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!”*

At this point, this born again point, anger and shame disappear and new life begins.

(3) June Callwood was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2003. Thinking about all the pain she had experienced in her life and wondering whether there was “anything spiritual” that could help ease her misery, she said it came to her in a simple thought, *“This is what it's all about. It's kindness. Not top-down kindness, giving a toonie to a street person and treating them like a slot machine, but stopping and talking to them. If people can behave well to each other, that's all that there is.”*

It was an insight that she shared regularly in print or in interviews right up to her death in April, 2007.

Jesus said to Peter three times *“Feed my sheep.”* That is the way I remember it, but for the first time I noticed the two verses that follow. Listen to them.

*“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’”*

It is almost as if the unasked question is answered. Peter asks, *“You know I love you— why do you keep telling me to feed your sheep?”* So Jesus gives him the answer. Because, Peter, you are going to die.

It is only when we really grasp that we are mortal that we can really know the true purpose of life. It is only then that we can really understand what really matters.

And it is simple. Know that you are loved by God and called to feed the sheep. Or as June Callwood discovered, to be kind.

It was for her akin to being born again. And as we've already noted it will be different for each one of us. It can be an experience of high drama, or it can be years years of gentle prodding and nudging, or it can be brief moments of new insight and understanding.

Conversion... Discovery... Redirecting...Examining... Changing. However we define it, we can never become immune to the moments that shake the very foundation of who we are or that massage our beliefs into new ones that reshape us as people. Our faith, especially, can never become so fine-tuned that we are immune from divine surprises in whatever shape, form, or fashion they appear. For we worship a resurrected Lord and Savior who is forever intruding, moving into our lives, sizing us up, and calling us forward.

When you worship a living God, get ready to be grabbed, bumped, evoked. For Easter says to us that God will stop at nothing to redeem this world—to redeem you and me. So, be ready. Be ready to be born again. Be ready to discover or rediscover the purpose of your life. Be ready to be called to feed God's sheep.

Thanks be to God. Amen.