

Conversion

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
The Great Vigil of Easter, Year C; April 3, 2010
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In the Name of God: Creator, Christ, and Spirit. Amen.

The year is 2006. A family pulls up to a stoplight in Atlanta. The fourteen year-old daughter sees a homeless man on the sidewalk to her left and a high-end import on her right. She says, "Dad, if that man didn't have such a nice car, then that homeless man could have a meal." Her father replies, "Yes, but if we didn't have such a nice car that man could have a meal."

An innocent exchange between daughter and father, right? Not quite; it doesn't end there. The daughter chews on that morsel of truth all afternoon and, by dinnertime, is ready to press the issue. She asks for an accounting of the family's good deeds. There are many: support for the food bank, checks to charities, even a family of Katrina refugees who temporarily lived in the basement. The daughter isn't satisfied and, as only a teenager might, she rolls her eyes. This sets Mom off: "What do you want us to do, sell the house?" "Yeah! That is exactly what I want you to do."

And so it begins. The family puts their house on the market, sell it for \$1.6M, and give half the proceeds to villagers in Ghana. Daughter and dad then write a book entitled, "The Power of Half." In the book they encourage readers to go and do likewise – not selling homes *per se* but doing something significant and sacrificial in order to repair the world. Most of it is simple stuff. Do you, she asks other teens, watch six hours of TV every week? Watch three and spend time with your family or serve others with the remainder.

I'm telling you this story because this family has undergone an experience of conversion, and that's our theme for the evening. They've moved from one state of being to another, holier state of being. They've gotten closer to the spirit of God, whether they'd use that language or not. They've multiplied their blessings by dividing them and then using them to bless others. Because of that, they are forever different and the world is different.

The Great Vigil of Easter intends to be a converting moment for all who participate in it. When we leave here this evening we should expect to be in another, holier state and closer to the spirit of God. One way we get there is through our shared reflection on salvation history. Every story we hear this evening calls us to be different. The story of the flood reminds us to reject wicked schemes, those plots and plans that tear down rather than build up the human family. The Exodus story beckons us away from oppression and into liberation in every part of our life. The vision of the valley of dry bones moves us away from despair and towards hope. The resurrection narrative finally drives it

all home: God in Christ has put away death forever and promised new life to all seek and serve the Lord.

So all of these readings make the same point but they do so in many different ways; to be a child of God means to be in a constant process of conversion that reshapes our inner being and blesses those around us. That's why we're here tonight. That hope lies behind everything we're doing right now. Some of you will mark that through baptism or by the sacramental rite of Confirmation; others will do the same through your reception into the Episcopal Church or by reaffirming your baptismal vows. Many of us here tonight won't be quite as public about it but we share your intent; all of us yearn to be born anew.

To accomplish that in the days to come we'll need to stay in community and, at times, go our own way. Conversion, that blessed state, is not always well received, especially by those who have a vested interest in the way things are. The family I told you about a few minutes ago, the Salwens, can testify to that. In addition to the praise they've received for their act of extraordinary generosity, they've also received rebuke. One of their friends started crying when she heard about it, feeling defeated because she couldn't do the same. That friendship withered over time. Others criticized them for using the money to help the people of Ghana instead of the poor here at home. A few accused them of being holier-than-thou, even though the Salwens went out of their way to avoid giving that impression. Some just thought it was plain stupid. One man wrote, "What kind of clown works his tail off, and busts his hump getting a decent education, only to listen to his kid suggest they give away the house?" To say that not everyone appreciated the gesture would be to understate the case.

But that's just how things go when you listen to the Spirit and, acting in good faith, take bold action. To be converted, to be made new in Christ, implies, among other things, that we'll have to let a lot go. That's what Paul means when he says that we are baptized into Christ's death - a part of our life must die so that we might walk in newness of life. Hannah, the daughter in tonight's story, was asked if she ever regretted selling their home. "There are some things I miss," she said. "We had an elevator that led up to my room, and it was really cool, because nobody else had an elevator in their room. My friends would say, 'Let's ride in the elevator!' But it really doesn't matter."

I don't share that detail to suggest that a fourteen year-old giving up her private elevator will bring in the Kingdom. I am suggesting that her family's sacrifice has inspired others to be converted, to think differently about their lives and their relationship to other people. One student wrote to them to say, "I have dreamed of living in a huge mansion and marrying a millionaire. But now, I see that the world is a largely connected community. I owe that to you. Today, I took out clothing from my closets that were too small or that I didn't wear... You're making a difference!"

Those are teenagers talking - truth from the mouths of babes. Our adult concerns may lie elsewhere and they may be equally urgent. I suspect you know what it is that God has been pressing on you of late. So what, tonight, is shifting within you? What is it that God intends to bring into being through you? What is passing away? Are you ready to let it go? Can you leave it on the cross? And what is coming into being? Are you ready to embrace it? Can you see it as part of the phenomena of the empty tomb, rising with Christ even now?

Tonight – chief among all nights - we die with Christ, trusting that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The life he lives, he lives to God. So we also consider ourselves dead to fear, to emptiness, to brokenness, to alienation, to separation and alive to one another, and to the world, and to God in Christ Jesus. I offer these words in his most holy name. Amen.

