Famous Conversions: Augustine Memory Verse: Romans 13:14

July 16th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Romans 7:14-25

**SLIDE 1: TITLE**

 We are looking at famous conversions, at stories of people coming into contact with Jesus Christ. And when people come into contact with Jesus Christ, their lives are changed. Last week we described some underlaying factors that conversion entails, things like a vision of the truth. That’s the thing that initiates conversion: Seeing and understanding the truth. And the truth is not always a pretty picture. The truth points out a simple and ugly fact about each and every one of us….we are sinners. You are a sinner, I am a sinner, we are far from prefect, and the truth is, that is a problem. But while the truth is busy pointing out this problem to us, it is also directing us into the arms of forgiveness. In Christ, we are forgiven, we are set free, and the result is joy! The final crowning characteristic of conversion is a changed life and a new mission. We said last week the proof of conversion is in the changed life.

 We saw that play out in the story of Saul, who was struck blind on the road to Damascus. He had a vision of Jesus the Truth, a conviction of sin, an experience of forgiveness and boy, did it change his life. He went from zealously hunting down Christians in their homes, to planting churches and preaching all about how Jesus was the Son of God. Saul’s conversion was quick, definitive, and dramatic.

 But we know that not all stories play out like Saul’s. His conversion story is in the bible because it happened that way, but that does not mean that all conversions should occur in the same way. Each of us in this room has a different experience of Jesus meeting with us. Maybe some of us are still in the process of meeting Jesus, maybe some of us have yet to come into contact with him fully. If that is true for you today, keep seeking! Keep praying! Keep clinging to his word and keep in mind the following story of our next famous convert.

**SLIDE 2: Augustine**

 He is known to all as Augustine, or Saint Augustine. He served as the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, which is now modern-day Algeria. Augustine is considered one of the most influential of the church fathers. His writings tend to focus on the great gift of God’s grace as our means for salvation and as a result many protestant thinkers, and especially the reformers, attached themselves to his teachings. His work called the “City of God” is one of the great theologies written in defense of the Christian faith. My version is only about a thousand pages if you are looking for some summer reading. But much more approachable and easily digested is his auto-biographical book called “Confessions”. It’s closer to 340 pages or so, but, interestingly, it is written in the form of a letter to God. Throughout the book, Augustine continually addresses God as “you”. This provides a very prayerful and intimate picture of Augustine’s walk with God. If you have the capacity, it is a book well worth reading.

 Augustine was born in 354 in North Africa. His father was by no means a religious man, but his mother Monnica was incredibly devoted to the Lord, as we will see. Augustine was a brilliant student and well-read. He was trained as a philosopher and rhetorician. We worked as a professor basically teaching others how to argue, how to debate well and how to speak publicly in a polished and erudite manner. But as a professor, he never stopped learning. Throughout his years, he was never content to settle into one mode of philosophical thought. He found, that after thinking them through, they would come up rather empty or there would be some inconsistency that he would be unable to harmonize. Augustine wanted to find the truth, but he could not find satisfaction in the answers he had come across. Eventually, to better his teaching career, Augustine moved to Milan and there came to meet Ambrose, who was serving as the bishop there.

**SLIDE 3: Ambrose**

Augustine attended his services and listened to his preaching but only to observe and appreciate his skills as a speaker. Augustine did not pay attention to the content of the sermons, but he eventually found that, despite himself, some of the content was seeping in and making an impression. He found he could not keep the style and the content apart. The Holy Spirit was up to something.

**SLIDE 4: “I was not yet ready to pray with a groaning humility for your (remember, that is God’s) help. My impulse was for intellectual challenge, I itched for argument.”**

 But in his “Confessions” Augustine admits, “I was not yet ready to pray with a groaning humility for your (remember, that is God’s) help. My impulse was for intellectual challenge, I itched for argument.” So in his quest for challenge and argument, Augustine dove deep into the abyss of living into his pride. He sought to be the best at what he did and sank his identity into recognition and earning higher teaching fees. He also became lost in the lust of his flesh. He maintained a mistress for many years whom he never bothered to marry, but who served to fulfill his desires. But Augustine thought himself to be a moral, good, upstanding citizen. For example, he avoided the games, that is the spectacle of the gladiators. He did not go in for such barbarity so he must therefore be a good person.

 But despite his self-congratulatory gold stars, Augustine was slowly coming to grips with is prideful outlook. He became to realize that he had dismissed Christin teaching without ever fully understanding it. What he knew, he knew from secondhand sources, even heretical ones. He admits, “The only notion I had of Christ…at that point, was of a man wise beyond all others.”

 How often is Augustine’s situation true for people in this world today? How often do people reject Christianity while not actually knowing the claims of Christ? How many people, if asked about Jesus, would admit he was a very wise teacher. Yet, his wisdom, instead of being followed to its conclusion, is, at best, sampled and at worst, twisted into something else entirely. This is why good teaching is so crucial. This is why a commitment to Jesus cannot just be characterized as an easy thing. We read in John chapter 6 when Jesus teaches about how he is the bread of life, and all must partake of him in order to be saved. The people listening decided that this teaching was too hard. It didn’t make sense to them. Then Jesus goes on to say that no one can come to him unless the Father enables them to do so; that his followers need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. At this point, many of his disciples turned away and stopped following him. They stopped following. Things got too hard, too confusing. Following Jesus, where he actually leads is hard…it’s hard because where is leads us is to the cross. Jesus tells us plainly that we must, “Take up the cross and follow him.” The cross is a place of misery and torture and death. We don’t want to go to the cross. We don’t want that kind of pain and sorrow. What we might not see is the beautiful, lush pasture just beyond; where quiets streams flow and our souls are restored. But the way to that heavenly pasture is through the brutality of the cross. So the question for us is, can we stick with Jesus? Can we follow him all the way? Or are we going to turn from him when things get hard?

 After experimenting with the teachings of dualism, which is the idea that this world is made up of good and evil; opposite but equal powers that are constantly warring with each other, Augustine delved into Platonism, which taught that there does exists objects outside of this physical world in our conscious mind, a sort of third realm. In his continued quest for truth, Augustine “came to the revered writings of your Spirit, and especially to the apostle Paul, with a grasping eagerness.” I love that…how often to we come to the bible with a grasping eagerness. Even before considering the bible to be the word of God, Augustine could see the value in this book. He saw in it’s pages some sort of light that he grasped for with eagerness.

 Halfway through his confessions, Augustine refers to himself as one who was “on the brink.” He writes, “The life I had led disgusted me. No longer on fire, as before, with ambition for glory and wealth.” So he is beginning to see the truth in God’s word and the Holy Spirit is bringing about a conviction of sinfulness. He is becoming disgusted with his life. Augustine saw that his will to choose was chained by a chain that begins with an urge and, that urge, yielded to, becomes a compulsion; and the compulsion unresisted, becomes a slavery.” He sensed in himself two wills; “one old, one new, one of the flesh, one of the Spirit, each warring on the other, and between their dissonances my soul was disintegrating.”

 One day, Augustine was visited by a friend named Pontician. Pontician began to tell him a story about some other acquaintances who had come to Christ. And as he spoke, Augustine writes: READ pg. 173 paragraph 16.

 He says, I used to pray to you for chastity, “’Give me chastity and self-control, but not just yet.’ I was afraid you would hear me too soon, heal me too soon, from my sick urges, which I wanted intensified rather than terminated.”

 Has that ever been you? Have you ever disgusted yourself? Have you ever prayed for change fully intending to do all you can to keep your life as it is? Have you ever been at war? In fact, we are all fighting or surrendering at this very moment.

 We heard earlier Paul’s estimation of himself to be a wretched man, and we see the same effect here in Augustine…seeing his sin, knowing his guilt, and hating it. Seeing his sin and trying to forget about it, obscure it…anything to avoid having to admit it. This struggle between two wills plagues us all.

 Augustine finally gave in to a sort of jealousy. He could not understand this story he has just heard of people finding the joy of salvation. He was upset that non-philosophers managed to surge ahead of him in their quest for truth, while he, with his cold learning, was still mired in sin. Augustine ran out to the garden and began to weep what he calls “great sheets of showering tears.” In his state of contrition, he distinctly heard the voice of a child, presumably from the neighbor’s yard chanting: “Lift! Look!” Augustine writes, “I leaped up, not doubting that is was by divine prompting that I should open the book and read what first I hit on.”

 And this is what he opened to: Roman 13:13-14 READ.

**SLIDE 5: Roman 13:13-14 Let’s behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. 14 Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don’t plan to indulge your selfish desires.**

Augustine says, “The very instant I finished that sentence, light was flooding my heart with assurance.”

 Augustine went on to be baptized, and he gave his life to the work of the church where he eventually became a bishop in Hippo. He was well known for his abilities to speak and write and his skill at defending the truth of Christianity. In this regard we see many parallels with the apostle Paul’s story. In both men, God had invested gifts and abilities, and in both, those gifts were ultimately used in service to God and the building of his church. Both heard a voice, one directly from the Lord in Paul’s case, and one that directed him to the Word of the Lord in Augustine’s. And we also have a very interesting cumulative effect here: The conversion of Paul and his changed life now directly affects the conversion of Augustine. Paul’s faithful work leads Augustine to the Lord.

 But certainly, there are many differences. Unlike Paul, Augustine spent years struggling to find the truth. He agonized over what to believe and why and in the midst of the struggle the Holy Spirit was hard at work, until the scales were finally tipped after Augustine read words that Paul himself had written. He glimpsed the truth, we saw his sin for what it really was, he discovered the joy of forgiveness, and he took on a new mission in life. Augustine has converted. He was forever changed by his Lord and Savoir Jesus Christ.

 But remember last week? Remember we said disciples make disciples? In Paul’s amazing conversion story there was a normal guy, named Ananias who came to disciple Paul. Augustine’s story is no different.

**SLIDE 6: Monnica**

 I mentioned briefly his mother Monnica. Monnica was a true believer, a faithful disciple and she fervently prayed for Augustine’s salvation his whole life. She never accepted that he would remain lost and she placed all her faith into the power of the Holy Spirit to convert her son. She labored over his salvation and even asked a priest to meet with her son in order to refute his bad thinking and convince him of the truth. But the priest encouraged Monnica to keep praying, but leave the boy alone…he is not ready and will not listen. He told her, “Be off and get on with your life – the son of such tears as you are shedding will never be lost.”

 Augustine knew well that his salvation was not happenstance a result of his personal wisdom. He knew the prayers and tears and time his mother had invested on his behalf. He knew that his connection to Jesus was an answer to prayer.

 So, I want to ask you if you might be willing to be a Monnica. Would you hold up those you love, who are lost, who have rejected the gospel in prayer? Would you invest your tears into their salvation? There are a million reasons why we don’t pray for such people. There are a million distractions that get in the way. But every conversion has a Monnica. Every heart that is turned toward the Lord benefits from a groundwork of prayer. I want to invite you to come forward, to lift up before the Lord someone who is lost. Come and bear your soul on behalf of the person. Ask God to reveal himself, ask him to soften this person’s heart. It may feel like an impossible prayer that can never happen, but we serve the God of the impossible. Come forward today to the front pew and lift up the lost before the Lord.