Famous Conversions: St. Teresa of Avila Memory Verse: Galatians 2:20

July 23rd, 2023 Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:12-17

SLIDE 1: TITLE

Christian conversion: It begins with a vision of truth that makes known to us a very real problem, our sin. Yet Christ, in his mercy, reaches out to us sinners, extends to us forgiveness and the result is joy! And following joy comes a growing hatred for that sin and we are set on our way with a new mission, a new goal in life. Conversion is a meeting with Jesus that initiates transformation in our lives. And as we have said before, converted people go to work.

We looked at the miraculous story of Saul of Tarsus, who hunted down Christians in order to stamp out the church. But after meeting with Jesus went on to establish many churches as well as pen the majority of that we call the New Testament. He came to be known as the apostle Paul.

Augustine of Hippo was a gifted teacher and rhetorician. He found Christianity to be nonsense, until he met with Jesus in his garden and read the words of Paul from the book of Romans. He was transformed as he began to understand what it means for Christ to dwell within us. He went on to serve as a bishop in the church.

**SLIDE 2: Teresa**

Today we turn to a woman named Teresa, St. Teresa of Avila. If you know anything about Teresa, you know that she is associated with a tradition within Christianity known as mysticism. We modern Christians are not too comfortable with mysticism. It rubs us the wrong way. Where we want facts and delineated information, mysticism says, “Hey, it’s a mystery.” The bible concurs. In Romans 11, Paul pulls out some questions from the Old Testament. He says, “God’s riches, wisdom and knowledge are so deep! They are as mysterious as His judgements, and they are as hard to track as his paths! Who has known the Lord’s mind? Or who has been his mentor? Or who has given him a gift and has been paid back by him?” It is mysterious how an eternal and perfect God can interact with finite and sinful humans. Mysticism tends to focus on the experiential nature of encountering God. These types of encounters tend to be very personal; a result of intentional and sustained prayer. Again Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12, mentions a man he knew who had a vison from the Lord and was caught up into the third heaven. The Christian mystics tends to push us toward an attitude of self-reflection, of quiet meditation, a love for Jesus that cuts right to the heart of who we are.

Teresa was born in Avila, Spain in 1515. Her parents were well off, but her father was incredibly strict. Teresa however, took after her mother, who was enthralled with romance novels and kept them hidden from her husband. Teresa identified with these love stories and as she grew, she found that she was interesting to the young men in town. She loved fashion and writes, “

I began to deck myself out and to try to attract others by my appearance.” Fearing that she might fall into sin, at age twenty Teresa joined a convent and became a nun. She felt she actually had more freedom there than in living under her father’s roof. She served her orders well and did all that was expected of her. We might say she lived a life in service to God, the end! Where is the conversion? How is it that we have a conversion story about a nun?

Well, let’s remember what we are calling conversion…it’s a meeting with Jesus. It’s an experience with the living God that initiates transformation. Teresa, though living as a nun, had yet to be transformed by Jesus. Certainly by anyone’s standards, she was a good person, she worked hard to remain free from sin, she lived out her faith, yet she was searching for God outside of herself in tangible things or in relationships with other people. Somehow, in her quest to be faithful to Christ, she was missing Christ. She puts it like this, “I went through a life of the greatest conflict. On one hand, God called me; on the other, I followed the world.”

**SLIDE 3: “I went through a life of the greatest conflict. On one hand, God called me; on the other, I followed the world.”**

But, Christ, continued to call her, continued to reach out to her and she was finally able to notice by way of a few different events. Just as Augustine found the presence of Christ in the words of Paul, so Teresa found Christ in the writings of Augustine. Remember, how we pointed out the cumulative effect of conversion? She was reading his “Confessions” and was struck by Augustine’s revelation.

He wrote: “Slow was I, Lord, too slow in loving you…You were waiting within me while I went outside me, looking for you there….You were with me all the while I was not with you…You were calling to me, shouting, drumming on deaf ears…”

Teresa realized that Christ is near, so near as to dwell within us! Paul proclaims the same thing: 2 Corinthians 13:5, “Examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Don’t you understand that Jesus Christ is in you?” Or again in Galatians 2:20 – “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” This truth is a reality, but it is also a mystery. We cannot mathematically breakdown how it works, or scientifically explain how it happens, but we trust that it is true, and we try to live into and embrace the mystery that is Jesus Christ living within the hearts of believers.

Armed with this vision of truth, Teresa was becoming more and more aware of her sin. Not physical acts she committed, but the misplaced affections for her heart. Teresa’s next touch from God came in the form of a sculpture that depicted Jesus at the pillar, in the midst of his journey to the cross.

**SLIDE 4: Sculpture**

Teresa, in a sense, came face to face, eye to eye with Jesus. She met his gaze with her own. About that moment, she writes, “So great was my distress when I thought how ill I had repaid Him for those wounds that I felt as if my heart were breaking, and I threw myself down beside Him, shedding floods of tears and begging Him to give me strength once for all so that I might not offend Him.” Teresa was better able to understand the price Jesus paid for her.

We are told the same story in the Gospels. In Luke 22:31 we are told that the headstrong Peter will actually deny that he even knows Jesus. Then Jesus goes into the garden to pray where he is arrested and taken before the Jewish high priest. Once there, Peter is confronted by several times about his association to Jesus until finally we read in verse 59: READ 59-62

The gaze of Jesus cuts to the heart. The gaze of Jesus is oftentimes something we would rather avoid. It easier to deny that we know Jesus. It seems safer to remain as we are. Transformation is hard. If the new is to come, the old must be done away with, it must be destroyed. The sin that we find so comfortable and so fun, must be put to death so that indeed, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. A mystery, yes, but a reality nonetheless.

In her desire to give herself fully and completely to Christ, Teresa began to receive visions. Again, we don’t do well with visions. We consider them to be untrustworthy. They are not verifiable. But whatever we might think, Teresa understood these visions to be gifts from God, a form of his reaching out to her as she reached out to him in prayer. One such vision involved a fiery spear which was trust into her heart, an experience that she says left her enflamed with love for God.

Now I am assuming here, but I think most of us hear about visions and our brains immediately conclude… “that’s weird”. It is supernatural for sure, and out of the ordinary, but hearing about such encounters with God can also help us to set aside our Western rationale for just a moment and contemplate the mysteries of God a little more deeply than we do. But we are not the only ones. Many of Teresa’s sisters in the convent made fun of her and ostracized her for her outlandish visions and behavior.

Once in her fifties she began to start up her own convents as she wanted to reform the current practices of her order. She thought there ought to be more focus on prayer, poverty and total obedience to Christ. Her disturbance of the status quo earned her the opposition and ire of the Catholic church itself. But Teresa weathered these challenges, and with a little help from a fellow monk, Teresa managed to open 16 convents across Spain.

She is remembered most for her book “The Interior Castle” which is based on a vision Teresa received about prayer. It pictures a glorious crystal castle in which Christ dwells at the center. The castle is made up of seven rooms or mansions that those who seek Jesus progress through until we reach a spiritual union with Jesus and he becomes our “all in all”.

**SLIDE 5: Prayer of Recollection**

Teresa is also known for what she calls the Prayer of Recollection. It’s what she would teach to those who would visit the convent looking for spiritual wisdom to guide their prayer life. I would like to share this prayer with you this morning because we are a people of prayer. We know that we pray or we are nothing. And this prayer of Recollection begins by recalling that you are, right now, in God’s presence. He lives in you. Recall a passage of scripture, something from the gospels, a story about Jesus that you can enter into. See his face hear his words…When you get distracted, not if, but when, acknowledge it and simply refocus. During this prayer, Teresa says that you may feel moved to speak…if so speak! If you do not feel so moved simply sit quietly with your Savior. And this for us is a big departure. I know for me sitting in silence feels like a big waste of time. Sitting in silence is nothing but a chance for me to mentally review all the things I have to do and all the places I need to be. Sitting in silence might work well for a nun in a convent, but for a busy dad, it’s just not for me. Unless, unless of course it is for me. Unless of course it is exactly what I need. I want all of Christ, I want to be filled by him, does he not want all of me? What else have I do to than meditate on Jesus and his words? Where else do I have to go than to sit in my Lord’s presence? I come to my times of prayer, I rattle off requests and praises and wrap it up with an “Amen,” but what have I heard from him? When do I stop to listen?

Teresa says to give this prayer of Recollection at least 30 minutes. Easy for a nun to say right? But I think Teresa, who to us comes from a different time and place, has something to offer us. Can we dedicate 30 minutes to Jesus, the Lover of our souls? Can we seek after him in the quiet of our hearts? Can we enter into the mystery that is the life of God? It’s a challenge for sure, and it may never be my preferred model of prayer, but a wise person is willing to receive correction. And maybe Teresa offers the very corrective we need.

**SLIDE 6: We cannot enter by any efforts of our own; His majesty must put us right into the center of our soul, and must enter there Himself.”**

She writes, “We cannot enter by any efforts of our own; His majesty must put us right into the center of our soul, and must enter there Himself.” She says there are no infallible rules about it, it’s simply a matter of putting ourselves in a position to receive all that God has for us.

So I want to try it, right here and right now. There are those of you who might be a little excited to try something different, and there are those of you who maybe are rolling your eyes. No matter where you might fall on that spectrum, Christ calls you to prayer. There are those of you who have never fully surrendered to Jesus, this is the time to address that as well. I want to open us up to sit in the silence, to bask in the presence of Jesus our Savior, to seek him, knowing that he is truly our center. We are going to sit in prayer for 3 minutes…that’s a tenth of the time Teresa suggests…it’s about the length of a commercial break. I want to warn you, it will seem like a very long time, and we are going to pretend that these few minutes will dramatically change your life, but we are going to proclaim that Christ is here, and our transformation is found in him. The front pew is available to any who might want extra prayer or who might feel they need a second conversion, or maybe a third or fourth. Jesus is calling…will you answer?

**SLIDE 6: Jesus is calling…will you answer?**

So I am going to pull out my timer and set it for three minutes. And we are going to sit for those minutes and enjoy Jesus. As Teresa suggests, maybe pick a story and put yourself in that story; put yourself into the presence of Jesus. Acknowledge that you are in his presence already. He dwells within you and if he doesn’t, he wants to.

I invite you to pray…..You did it! Great job! I wonder how long you could you get your time throughout the course of this week? Can you stay in this type of prayer for 30 minutes? Maybe shoot for 10? And as you pursue Jesus in this way, let someone know about it! Share how it is going. Contact myself or Pastor Cassi or Sherry in the office. We want to know what you have learned from the experience. How has it affected your walk with Jesus? Let us know. Blessings as you pursue Christ. Amen.