Famous Conversions: Dorothy Day Memory Verse: Matthew 25:40

Sept. 3rd, 2023 Scripture Reading: Psalm 95:6-11

**SLIDE 1: TITLE**

Throughout this series we have looked at many different people from many different eras and walks of life. All of the folks we have discussed have done great things for the Lord, that is, in large part, why they are considered famous. But despite their impressive accomplishments, we recognize that men and women of faith are still men and women. Though we might say that they are on the road to perfection, they have not reached the destination yet.

Conversion is the thing that sets us on the right path, the gives us a proper orientation. Conversion is a work of God in our lives that reveals to us the truth, that makes known to us our sin, our desperate need for a Savior. And when we meet with that Savior, we find the joy of forgiveness, the freedom from sin. Finally, God sets us out on a new mission with a changed life.

**SLIDE 2: Picture**

The Catholic social activist and advocate for the poor, Dorothy Day makes up our final famous conversion. I became familiar with the name “Dorothy Day” years ago when I lived in Rochester and came to hear about the Dorothy Day house, which provided temporary housing for those struggling with homelessness. In fact, their mode of operations is very similar to the homeless shelter we support down in Hugo, where one of the rooms is named after our church and we commit to volunteering a few weeks a year so that the shelter can continue to function and help those in need. But the desire to help others in need is not uniquely Christian. Altruism is the word we use…a sense of selflessness or a least a shared humanity that helps drive people to extend help to other people. But the Church, capital C, has gotten good at supporting solutions to problems financially, but staying away from the problem physically. We want to help, we know we should help, but we don’t want to get too involved. It’s hard to take that extra step; to get out hands dirty and share in someone else’s struggle.

Dorothy Day was born in 1897 in New York city, the daughter of a sports reporter. As a child, she had an active conscience. She knew right from wrong, good from evil.

**SLIDE 3: “We did not search for God…We took him for granted.”**

But as to God, Dorothy says, “We did not search for God…We took him for granted.” She loved to read and she loved adventure and despite taking God for granted, ha planted many seeds in her life. She attended church at times with her Methodist neighbors and though she says she believed; she did not know what she believed. As a girl, Dorothy ran into her neighbors house looking for a playmate and caught the mother, Mrs. Barrett, praying while down on her knees. This act made an indelible impression of Dorothy and she began to mimic what she saw in her own prayers before bedtime. She fell in love with and sang out of an old Episcopal hymnbook. When she was thirteen, Dorothy came across a volume of John Wesley’s sermons. She says she was, “strongly attracted to his evangelical piety.” Which is just a churchy way of saying Wesely had a sense of holiness that he wanted to share with others.

When she turned 14, Dorothy’s mother had a baby, and due to family circumstances, much of the care and duties for the new baby fell on Dorothy. Even though he was a difficult and fussy baby, she remembers that time with fondness and writes, “The very hardship of taking care of him, the hours I put in with him, made me love him the more.”

I think we can see many seeds planted in these experiences. We see many ways in which God reached out to Dorothy with visions of truth, with revelations of who he is and who we are. Hints about the importance of prayer and how to do it. Inklings about what it looks like to give of yourself to those who need help, those who are weak and vulnerable, like a baby brother. So armed with these bits of Christian influence and possessing an active conscience, Dorothy headed off to college.

Once there she was fell in with the anarchist crowd and those who obessed over class warfare. She joined the socialist party and leaned hard into identifying with the poor and oppressed. She worked as a journalist writing for socialists papers and found herself frustrated with the religious crowd. She resented the wall that stood between the poor and the wealthy and was critical of the fact that religious people could be so “comfortably happy in the face of the injustices in the world.”

**SLIDE 4: “comfortably happy in the face of the injustices in the world.”**

She also struggled to be away from family, especially the little brother she had helped raise. Her autobiography is entitled “The Long Loneliness” and this time in her life was her first taste of really feeling alone. Though she had been strongly influenced by Christian teaching thus far, she found that her new worldview and the company she kept were not compatible. So Dorothy rejected religion, she consciously began to swear and take the Lord’s name in vain so as to shock her friends who did go to church.

She was young, she wanted adventure, she wanted to disrupt the status quo. She came to agree with Karl Marx who taught that religion is the opiate of the people. Faith is just a lie that keeps people happy and sedated. She writes, “I felt then for the first time that religion was something I must ruthlessly cut out of my life…I hardened my heart. It was a conscious and deliberate process.”

Dorothy reveals to us here a profound spiritual truth…we have a say in the state of our hearts. In Romans 1, Paul sums up the entire problem humanity faces in verse 18; “God’s wrath is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodly behavior and the injustice of human beings who silence the truth with injustice.”

**SLIDE 5: “God’s wrath is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodly behavior and the injustice of human beings who silence the truth with injustice.”**

I think Paul nails the root of all our strife, we silence the truth. We suppress what we know to be truth in favor of what we would rather be true. Paul also says in that section that we have exchanged truth for lies. The writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 3:12-15 READ.

**SLIDE 6: “Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that none of you have an evil, unfaithful heart that abandons the living God. Instead, encourage each other every day, as long as it’s called “today,” so that none of you become insensitive to God because of sin’s deception. We are partners with Christ, but only if we hold on to the confidence we had in the beginning until the end. When it says, Today, if you hear his voice, don’t have stubborn hearts as they did in the rebellion.  
Hebrews 3:12-15**

We are told to watch out! This hard heart thing can creep up on you. It can become a reality before you know it. So pay attention to the state of your heart. That’s one of the reasons we need church. We need a place to come every week that can perform a little heart-check. Is it still beating in there? Is it still responsive to God’s word? To prayer? To the community of believers? Without a constant check-in, our hearts grow hard, they callus over… they become insensitive to God. So we are warned, way back in the Psalms we were warned: “Today if you hear his voice, don’t have stubborn hearts as they did in the rebellion.” The rebellion there is a reference to the Israleites who were miraculously freed from Egypt and were made to wander in the desert. They began to complain about the contitions of their freedom. They figured it would be better to be a slave in Egypt then to perish out in the middle of nowhere. They lost their faith, their trust in the God who cleared out the Red Sea for his people. They suppressed the truth, blocked out the memory…they hardened their hearts and abandoned God.

SLIDE 7: Picture

Dorothy admits she knew right from wrong and good from evil, but she made a choice, a decision, to turn from the very truth that created those categories to begin with, and to lean into her opposition to injustice against the working class. But how can one truly fight injustice without knowing the God of justice? The answer is you make up your own sense of justice. This is so prevalent in our culture today. The term “justice” has had its spiritual weight removed so that all we talk about anymore is the social aspect of justice. Justice no longer pertains to sin and righteousness, but rather to equal outcomes and redistributing wealth. We can’t forget that God is a God of justice. He justifiably punished the very people he rescued from Egpyt because they had hardened their hearts, because they needed a wake up call, a reminder, that wrath, punishment, is a part of the reality of justice.

Dorothy fell into the trap of thinking that she was more just, more loving, more kind than God himself. She writes, “Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the meek,’ but I could not be meek at the thought of injustice. I wanted a Lord who would scourge the money-changers out of the temple, and I wanted to help all those who raised their hand against oppression. For me Christ no longer walked the streets of this world. He was two thousand years dead and new prophets had risen up in his place. The poor and oppressed were going to rise up, they were collectively the new Messiah, and they would release the captives.” You can see this made-up sense of justice in which the collective, the people were her messiah.

Day continued to write and to pursue societal change at the hand of the masses. She ended up being arrested twice during this period picketing for women’s suffrage. She put her all into this type of work which she believed would change the world for the better. She was motivated and encouraged by the bohemian friendships she had formed. She lived in poverty, wrote about those in poverty and identified with the poor, she was dead set on making her mark on the world. Dorothy was living in a time of huge societal change: World War I just ended along with the Russian Revolution, woman received the right to vote in 1919, and ten years later the Great Depression would hit the United States. She says of that time that she was following the “devices and desires of my own heart.” She was known for her excessive drinking, she attempted suicide and aborted her first pregnancy. Her biographer, William Miller puts it this way, “If anyone, in the first twenty-five years of life, seemed headed for despair, it was she, yet she turned away from that fate and, having set her vison on eternity, she never looked back.”

In 1918, Dorothy put her time and effort into nursing. She enjoyed getting back into the work of caring for others in need. Though the work was extremely demanding, Dorothy found a sense of calling in it. She ended up attending mass every week with a Catholic co-worker. God was reaching out to Dorothy once again. But it would still be decade before her hardened heart would respond.

After the war had ended, Dorothy decided to return to writing. She eventually fell in with her old crowd again and became involved with a staunch atheist and anarchist named Forster Bettingham. Though they were never legally married, they lived as though they were and eventually Dorothy became pregnant again. She had found in this child a renewed sense of awe, of love…a softening of the heart she had hardened. She found herself praying daily. She began to attend church regularly. She recalled a time when she planted a garden: “I was saying as I planted seeds in the garden, ‘I *must* believe in these seeds, that they fall into the earth and grow into flowers and radishes and beans. It is a miracle to me because I do not understand it. Neither do naturalists understand it. The very fact that they use glib technical phrases does not make it any less of a miracle, and a miracle we all accept. Then why not accept God’s mysteries?” Dorothy found herself in the midst of two miraculous mysteries: one of being with child and one of coming to faith.

**SLIDE 8: ‘I *must* believe in these seeds, that they fall into the earth and grow into flowers and radishes and beans. It is a miracle to me because I do not understand it. Neither do naturalists understand it. The very fact that they use glib technical phrases does not make it any less of a miracle, and a miracle we all accept. Then why not accept God’s mysteries?”**

Somehow, by some mystery of God, Dorothy was confident and determined to have her daughter baptized. She wanted to give her daughter a grounding in faith, to share with her the spiritual relaities the rest of the world tries to deny. She chased down a nun in the street to see to it that the baptism would happen.

Soon enough Tamar Teresa (named after Teresa of Avila, by the way) was born. Dorothy did have her baptized and she experienced a great sense of joy in her connection with, as she calls the church, the Mystical Body of Christ. Her common law partner would have none of it and Dorothy came to a crossroads. “To become a Catholic meant for me to give up a mate with whom I was much in love. It got to the point where it was the simple question of whether I chose God or man.” Again, she sums up a profound spiritual reality. It’s very simple: do we choose to live for God or for other people? Dorothy chose God…as her biographer put it, “She set her vision on eternity and never looked back.”

**SLIDE 9: “She set her vision on eternity and never looked back.”**

When she was thirty years old, Dorothy was baptized into the church herself. She writes, “One part of my mind stood at one side and kept saying, ‘What are you doing? Are you sure of yourself? What kind of an affection is this? What act is this you are going through?Are you trying to induce emotion, induce faith, partake of an opiate, the opiate of the people?...I wanted to die in order to live, to put off the old man and put on Christ.”

Dorothy soon met a man named Peter Maurin. He was a peasant from France, a fellow Catholic who held a vivid vision for a green revolution. This was not a call for environmentalism, rather he desired to bring the worker and the wealthy together. He thought that people in poverty would be able to prosper by living together on farm communities, sharing the labor and growing their own food. He was a dreamer, a philosopher, a teacher with a compelling vision. Day says that he ignored the differences in people and stressed concordance. His vision included round-table discussions between varying classes, houses of hospitality for those in need as well as communal farming for both work and sustenance. He was fond of the phrase, “Eat what you raise and raise what you eat.” In 1933, by way of reaching these goals, Peter and Dorothy founded a paper entitled *The Catholic Worker.* It was filled with articles calling out abuse and injustice in politics and workplaces but was also laced with quotes and meditations from saints and priests. It promoted an active faith – a Christian worldview that had tangible impact. The paper was sent to parishes and priests throughout the country and soon had a circulation of a hundred thousand. Today, the Catholic Worker movement still exists. The paper is still available and nearly two hundred houses of hospitality still run throughout the country.

Jesus sometimes gets relegated as a soft spoken, easy going, gentle soul. But he had some harsh words of judgement for those who would purport to follow him in Matthew 25: 31-46 READ.

**SLIDE 10- 12: Matthew 25: 31-46**

There is a definitive, hard separation here, and what you believe is not mentioned here. What you know about God, or theology is not mentioned here. In fact, both sides are clueless: “When did we see you?”

**SLIDE 13: Picture**

Jesus spoke of the least of these. Now I could quibble with Dorothy about many things both theological and political. I could question some of her decisions, I could criticize some of the company she kept, but did she care for the least of these? Did she live to help those in need? Because of her witness, because of her changed life, I can shut my mouth and learn something from Dorothy Day. She never had a well-made plan for how to proceed. She was never well-funded or well-staffed, but she carried on in faith. She believed her call was to stand for the least of these, not debate their theology, not point out their moral failures, but to extend to them the love of Christ. Radicalism calls for revolution, but Day knew that what was most needed was a revolution of the heart; the ability to see Christ in others and to love them as God loves us. In the church, Christ’s mystical body, we, along with the least of these, find community; we find home.

“I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these, you have done it for me.” May we learn to live out these words. Amen.