

The Three Conversions:

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Luke 12:49-56

St. Mary the Virgin

August 14, 2022

Luke 12:49-56 “I came to cast fire upon the earth. How I wish that it was already ablaze! I have a baptism I must experience. How I am distressed until it’s completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division. From now on, a household of five will be divided—three against two and two against three. Father will square off against son and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother; and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” Jesus also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud forming in the west, you immediately say, ‘It’s going to rain.’ And indeed it does. And when a south wind blows, you say, ‘A heat wave is coming.’ And it does. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret conditions on earth and in the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret the present time? (CEB)

Frequently I hear people talk about how loving, forgiving and accepting the NT is as opposed to the OT. People who feel this way have not read this passage for it exceeds any judgment in the OT. But this is an important if oft neglected passage, especially to preach a sermon about the value of Christianity and its recognition of the real world in which we live. This is a gospel aimed at those who understand that Christianity requires real and hard choices. This passage knows nothing of cultural Christianity, the predominant form of Christianity today. This passage assumes that being a Christian is a costly decision much as it is today in Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and Egypt. It does not assume a context like ours in which Christianity is the dominant culture.

A byproduct of being the dominant culture means that not only does this gospel sound strange, there is no sense that today is any more important than yesterday or tomorrow so I need not take the demands of Christianity too seriously. The content of Christianity is not simply promises of security and can indeed cause conflict within society and families as we read in today’s Gospel. We need a vocabulary that speaks about life in faith.

You are a particularly apt congregation because you have chosen to be in an un-air-conditioned church on the second Sunday in August. During the summer the motivation to go to church seems to dampen among many parishioners who would otherwise describe themselves as being regular in attendance. There are some who believe the church closes in summer, and indeed we do lower our activity level and perhaps our expectations. I see you as the group who are working a little harder than those who are not here today on what Christianity means to you. It is in this context that I quote from the gospel for this morning: *Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*

Since many of you know me you may be expecting that this Gospel is a wonderful set up for a political sermon. I've certainly given many of them, including last Sunday. However, this Sunday I want to focus more on the tools the church and spirituality have for us to deepen our Christianity so that we can make faithful responses to the many political challenges that surround us today. Many of you know or can predict where I am on these issues, so just keep that in the background. I sustain my positions by the insights I'm sharing today. I remember Bill Coffin¹ saying at the opening service of Trinity Institute many years ago: *If you hate the evil more than you love the good then all you are is a damn good hater.*

Everything I'm about to say is me preaching to me. I wish I was more faithful and more spiritual and actually more often internalized and practiced what I'm about to say. But I struggle with it. It's much easier for me to talk about the Social Gospel and how we're not living up to it either as a church or a Christian society than it is for me to talk about spirituality. I like doing things. I resist meditation. I pray daily, but at a set time and following the Prayer Book Office. I resist free form prayer. I read Richard Rohr and others who write about a meditative practice and while I admire their lives I have difficulty conforming my life to what they practice. I live by my calendar. I can lose myself in spreadsheets. For instance, just to prove I'm an engineer, I've cataloged every article in every journal I receive, and I subscribe to five, going back to at least 1976. I do this on the day the journal arrives and I can search the database by author, title, journal, date and subject. There are almost 8600 records in this database. I have no trouble doing something.

But I have trouble being quiet before God.

However, from long experience I know that if I neglect my spiritual side, and it is a temptation I fight daily if not more often, then all I become is Bill Coffin's damn good hater. I first came to St. Mary's more than 20 years ago because I knew my spiritual life was deficient and I needed a stronger not entirely intellectual worship experience.

Since I mostly preach and teach here you know I continue to value highly the intellectual experience but I also know there is another side to a faithful life.

I struggle to love all of God's creation and I seek to be compassionate even as I am passionate about the many failings of Christianity as a faith and TEC as an expression of that faith.

I think, and I'm projecting but my conversations lead me to think that I'm on safe ground, that we would all like to always be secure and confident in our own spirituality. None of us are. We run hot and cold in our response to faith. This is not only true it is most especially important.

This morning, in what I hope is not too intellectual a delivery, I will talk about a process I wish I more fully trusted and I hope it is one you want to embrace more fully too.

¹ William Sloan Coffin. Chaplain at Yale during Vietnam. Pastor of Riverside Church. Headed Nuclear Freeze Movement in early 80s.

One of the secrets of spirituality is that there are three conversions². We normally speak of one, at most. The conversions run independently of baptism and can occur at any moment in our lives, usually however only after maturity. Since most of us were baptized as infants it's good that conversions occur independently of it.

The first conversion is Purgative, that is, it separates us from the world. It gives us new eyes to look through. In it Christianity is the most exciting thing in the world. In Christianity we find meaning, peace and wholeness. People who have undergone a first conversion are zealots eager for everyone to be where they are. For them Christ is peace; the church is an easy burden. In its more exuberant stages tongues, the gift of prophecy and the interpretation of prophecy may result. But the primary sign of a first conversion is excitement, exuberance and enthusiasm. It is that moment when we gain the "aha" when we finally know in our heart of hearts that Christianity is for us and all doubt is removed. In other denominations it is marked by an altar call, perhaps some of you have been to Cursillo or Tres Dias weekends. They are all about the Purgative conversion and people who return from those weekends are filled with enthusiasm for Christianity.

For some the first conversion is the only conversion ever needed and they lead a life of bliss in the church. But for most of us the enthusiasm of the first conversion wears off in a few years, or even months, and we begin to wonder about its validity. For those of us for whom it wears thin the first conversion is very much like the resolve to diet. It is a great high, but it quickly passes and we regain the weight. The first conversion is not enough to sustain us in our Christianity.

Many leave the church at the moment the first conversion dissipates. They leave with the words: "It no longer has the same meaning it once did" or "My life is just too busy now" or "Mr. So-and-so did such-and-such to me and I cannot see why I should have to worship with that bunch of hypocrites³!" or perhaps the preacher is just too liberal and I wish he'd just focus on inspiring me to be a good Christian and lead a successful life.

It is at this point that we need to hear today's gospel and to be told that Christianity never intended to bring us peace. We have heard too frequently that faith should protect us from the world. The bible knows nothing of faith that protects us from the world. The bible only knows about faith that equips us to live in the world and not be defeated by its challenges. The second conversion, the Illuminative Conversion, is marked by tears. The issues of this conversion are betrayal, both of Jesus and by Jesus, failure, both personal and of the institution and falling apart. It is the time of the Dark Night of the Soul. At this time the church no longer offers us anything. Perhaps we've lost a job, had a medical issue, or simply been disappointed or bored, and attending and supporting church seems less important and ultimately unimportant. Many leave seeking

² For more development of this theme see Alan W. Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1985. Also follow Richard Rohr, OFM, <https://cac.org/sign-up/> for a daily meditation on the same themes using different terminology.

³ I recommend reading C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. Screwtape writes to his apprentice Wormwood that to get the client to stop attending church have him focus on the hypocrisy of the other people in church.

stimulation elsewhere. They may at some point experience another first conversion and move on, but they have turned back at the opportunity to reach a new depth in their Christianity.

It is an Illuminative conversion because of its giving us the opportunity to develop a mature faith.

Christianity means having to confront our failures. To be a true believer we must have these three characteristics:

1. The divided mind.
2. The uneasy conscience.
3. The sense of personal failure.

The divided mind has always meant to me that the church is truest to itself when it asks questions, not when it offers answers. When friends are church shopping I urge them to find one that is about questions. If it has certainty run! For instance, there is no easy answer to the question of pro-life or pro-choice, the church does its members a disservice when it pretends that there is. There is no easy answer to the question of capital punishment, to the question of sexuality, to the question of pacifism or just war, and the church must admit that it has a divided—not paralyzed but divided—mind on these and many other issues.

An uneasy conscience means to me that we can never rest content. Jesus was asked by a conscientious man—who is my neighbor? The man expected Jesus to take a side in the rabbinical debate concerning just how far one had to be neighborly to fellow Jews, and instead Jesus relates the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is impossible for us ever to do enough. But because of prevenient grace—the fact that Christ has called us before we could respond—we can with Martin Luther, *Sin Boldly*—that is, we can act and repent sincerely if later we find we acted in error. To explain prevenient, we baptize babies because we believe in prevenient grace. That is we believe that God desires us before we can respond and even if we fail to respond.

The sense of personal failure is not meant to throw us into the clinical depression of Father Melancholy in Gail Godwin's well written novel⁴. It is meant to root us in our common humanity so that we can say when someone who is poor, diseased, discriminated against or failed walks into our presence—there but for the grace of God go I. Since only God's grace separates us, we can react to that person as someone else for whom Christ died.

*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners*⁵ our Lord says. A believer has to know that she or he is sick. The second conversion, Illuminative conversion is the acknowledgment that you need a savior, that Christianity has something to offer you in your weakness. The task is to keep the love of God alive in your weakness. In this weakness we experience the Dark Night of the Soul. This experience leads to the third conversion.

The third conversion is the Unitive conversion. It is the time when one can put aside the desire for an experience of God. In this conversion Jesus goes away, but I go on. It is marked by the absence of God, the abandonment of God and by

⁴ Father Melancholy's Daughter. 1991

⁵ Mark 2:17, see also Matt 9:12 and Luke 5:31

surrender. This does not mean that God abandons us but it means that God gives us space to be ourselves. It's much like moving beyond falling in love. Falling in love, as Scott Peck described in The Road Less Traveled, is like falling into a ditch. We don't make good decisions in a ditch. Marriage succeeds if partners give each other space to be themselves and to grow. This Unitive or third conversion is God giving us space to grow and be ourselves. In this we experience our own emptiness and we are afraid. In this we become mature. This maturity is marked by three characteristics:

precision
fear
delight

Precision means what do I believe and what do I need to believe? Fear exists in the question of am I alone? Does the dryness mean that I am with God, or does it mean that I have been abandoned? Delight is seen as we explore what do I know now about myself and who I am for myself and others?

Only at this third or Unitive conversion are we able to engage in contemplation. Only at this third or Unitive conversion can we see and choose reality. At this third conversion we unlearn hate and learn love, even unto martyrdom. At this conversion peace is restored, but not peace as the world means peace—not simply the absence of war and not my victory over another—but a peace which is divided from the world.

Most people long for repeated first conversions and they may get them. Few people survive to the second conversion because they see tears as a sign that Christianity has no more to offer them. They see this at the very moment Christianity is about to free them. No one can make any of the three conversions alone, we need each other. To attempt to be faithful alone is to behave in a foolhardy fashion and it is doomed. Even those who have reached a third conversion may find themselves experiencing a first conversion again.

The tragedy is that few of us know that tears, the Dark Night of the Soul, humility and a sense of failure are gifts from God. I hope that having now had these three conversions, Purgative, Illuminative and Unitive introduced to you that you will now seek to move on this path yourself knowing that it is a path and understanding that even the promise of division is good news.