

23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

23 October 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Acts 2:43-47

There's nothing quite like an impending move to drive home the benefits of divesting of one's stuff. Even trying to be diligent every year about going through my clothes and possessions to bring stuff to the church for the Sunset Gap collection, I still find an overwhelming abundance of things from which I am more than willing to depart. But even with that, I am still a long, *long* way from the folks we en-

counter in Acts this morning.

Our scripture today talks about some of the earliest Christians making some radical life changes. Those folks got rid of all their possessions. Not just the possessions most of us would happily box up and give away like that Christmas sweater with the red flashing reindeer nose on it your Aunt Beatrice gave you 14 years ago and you still haven't worn, or that 27th box of Pyrex dishes you've been

holding on to since your wedding (because 26 is just the right amount). But I mean they gave away *everything*. Furniture. Cars. Watches. Clothes. Laptops. Flat-screen televisions. Everything.

They sold it all and gave the money to people in need. And if that wasn't a radical enough lifestyle change, in many cases they left behind their families and the security that offered as well. And perhaps most telling, these folks spent time in church *every day!* If showing up at church every single day doesn't convince you this is a pretty radical change for folks, I don't know what will.

Now this is stewardship season in most churches, but with apologies to Paul and the MIS committee, I didn't choose this text this morning to try and sell you (pun intended), or myself for that matter, on showing up for church every day and giving the church all your money. Those can be great things, and if God is leading you to do them, then you have my blessing. And you probably have the MIS committee's blessing, too. But there's something else going on here that I think is more relevant to all of us. And that is God working through these folks, these ordinary followers of Jesus, to

transform them. Because even more than just giving away all their possessions, the folks we encounter in Acts have had a conversion moment, a spiritual awakening. And those moments have the potential to bring about fundamental change within each of us as well.

Now sometimes those conversion moments might be things we anticipate or see coming. Things like marriage or divorce, death of a loved one, loss of a job, a new child, a new love. Other times they catch us off guard. Surprise us. Conversion moments don't always change us, not necessarily. Some-

times we let them slip by, brush them off, deny or avoid their ability to transform us. But what happens when we do let those moments take hold of us?

Many of you know I didn't always plan on going in to ministry. Or it might be more accurate to say that I never planned on going in to ministry. Don't get me wrong. I appreciate the church and the ministries the church often undertakes. I love the liturgy, love reading and studying the Bible. And I did grow up in church for the most part, but I didn't love it. I didn't feel drawn toward it where I wanted it to be a part of my life every single day.

In fact, quite the opposite. When I was in middle school, I had a difficult time with a bully in school. I was a scrawny kid. Had to get glasses years before any of my classmates, so heard all the “four eyes” cracks. My family didn’t have a whole bunch of money, so when my classmates were wearing “Member’s Only” jackets, I was sporting the knockoff version. And that bully, you see, also went to our church.

All of which is just to say that youth events, and especially retreats, were not particularly safe or enjoyable places for me. So I didn’t leave high school with a positive experience of

church. I was thrilled when I got to college and no one was making me get out of bed on Sunday mornings and dragging me to church. At that point, I would have been okay with the ever popular twice-a-year visitation schedule of Christmas and Easter, and only then because I expected Mom and Dad would be going.

But God has a way of seeking us out. Desperate for a summer job that would pay enough for me to not live at home, I settled for lifeguarding at a summer camp. That turned out not to be such a bad gig, so I returned the next summer, and the one after

that. Right before my junior year of college, a friend I knew from camp who had just graduated called to ask if I would be interested in taking over for him as youth director at a nearby church. I figured I knew enough games and Bible study stuff from summers at camp that I could manage to entertain some youth for a couple of hours once a week in exchange for a regular paycheck, so I took the job.

One thing led to another, and after working for a short while after college, I ended up at seminary, in part because I didn't know what else to do and that seemed like a way

to pass the time until I figured it out. But even seminary didn't sell me on a life in the pastorate. Quite the contrary, in fact. In seminary I was reminded again of some of the reasons I had avoided church earlier in life.

Turns out the bullying that kept me away from church as a youth was still present a decade or more later. And even worse, in many cases it was now institutionalized. Talented friends, gifted preachers, denied jobs, denied internships, because they were female, or gay, or not white, or in one case, because they were single.

After seminary, I ended back up in computer programming for a while. And there were a lot of nice things about it. I never had to work weekends. I never got called into work at night. I got off at 5, and I made a good salary. Better than I have made in any church I've served.

So when the call came to move to Tennessee and take a church offering a manse and salary of \$25,000 and change, I was not really sold on the change. But God continued to nudge me, through Sarah, through a couple of friends, and now nearly 15 years later, I'm here with you.

Two things I take from reflecting on my own journey. First is that my journey from avoiding church to pastoring a church included not a single moment of transformation or conversion, what many of our evangelical friends refer to as "being saved." My journey did not have any single moment I can point to where I was ready to sell everything and give all my money to the poor or join with a bunch of other Christians going to church every day. Sometimes, those transformative moments are more of nudges than reorientation. Or maybe I spent a lot of energy and time ignoring those

“conversion moments” along the way.

But they ultimately led me here. For nearly 11 years – longer than anywhere else I’ve ever lived. And our time together has been another conversion moment for me, because in our time together, you have reminded me of what church can be. I don’t mean to suggest that things have been perfect. We know they have not. But you, this church family, have reminded me of the love and grace and humor and welcome and generosity that are possible with the family of God. And because all those other little moments, nudges, led us

together, I am so grateful.

This ended up being more of a call story than a sermon, in retrospect. But I guess the conversion story I felt most qualified to talk about was my own. I think all through the scriptures we get accounts of these conversion moments, transformational experiences. And for me a lot of them seem very profound, very sudden. Paul walking on the road to Damascus, blinded by the light of Jesus, transforming him from persecutor to evangelist. Thousands of people hearing Peter preach on Pentecost of getting baptized. Maybe two-thirds of them

didn't come back to church again until Christmas, but they still had a transformational experience there.

But if no single moment in your life has led you to sell all your possessions and give the money to the church, or to use the proceeds from your tent-making business to sail around the Mediterranean world starting churches, or even to leave your career as a fisherman or a tax collector and follow Jesus, do not think for a minute that God is not still transforming you. Changing you. Calling you to something new.

Maybe those moments are a blinding light. Maybe they are

subtle nudges over the course of many years. Or maybe you're as dense as I am sometimes and it takes a whole bunch of not-so-subtle blinding lights for God to get your attention. But however those moments of awakening, of conversion, work their way into your life, be mindful of them. Look out for them. Because to miss those places, those moments, would be missing the work that God is doing in your life. Or perhaps even worse, maybe missing out on God nudging you to be the transformative moment in someone else's life.

Amen.