

THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL

“Called by God”

Galatians 1:11-24

I'm truly amazed by the number of telephones in use in our society. Everybody has at least one and in most cases more than one. I guess that hit home for me when I was going through my numbers a couple of weeks ago. One couple had a home number, each had a cell phone and each had a work number for a total of five. As I continued reviewing my numbers, I came to realize that that wasn't all that unusual.

What I do find unusual and, in a real way, somewhat disappointing is that for all the telephone numbers, most of the calls we get really aren't all that important. Oh, sure, some of them are but think about it for a moment. Take away the wrong numbers, the calls from someone trying to sell you something, and calls from those who just want to shoot the breeze, and how many important calls do we really get?

More than that, how many calls do we get that one could call “life changing?” I mean calls that literally change our lives? Perhaps the last life changing call I got, other than the news that I had a new grandchild, was almost six years ago when this congregation called to let me know that they were issuing me a call to serve as a pastor here at First Good. How about you?

In today's epistle reading from Galatians, Paul reminds us of a “life changing” call he got just a few years earlier. Of course, it wasn't a telephone call. It was a divine call – a call from God himself.

You may remember that he was on his way to Damascus when he got that call. He was going there to arrest Christians and to bring them back for trial in Jerusalem. You see, Paul, or Saul as he was also known, was a man on a mission – a mission he thought was from God but really wasn't. It was a mission, alright, but it was a mission borne of extreme zeal for the traditions of the fathers, as he said. He was trying to get rid of Christianity, in general, and Christians, in particular. He thought Christianity was a threat to his religion and to the religion of his fathers. And so he zealously was about the business of seeking out Christians, first in Jerusalem including Christians like Stephen. He was even in charge of stoning Stephen to death. And having sought to rid Jerusalem of these Christians, he zealously expanded his net northward to find more and to bring them back to what he thought was justice. And so he went to Damascus.

But God had other plans. You see, it was on that road to Damascus that God “called” Paul. He called him through a vision in which Jesus, God incarnate, spoke to Paul. And that call changed Paul forever. It changed his mind and his heart and his soul. It changed him from one who stood before God, zealous for the traditions of his fathers, but dead in unfaith, into one who was made alive in Christ and now zealous to proclaim this Jesus as

the Christ to the ends of the earth. It changed him from the inside out. You see, calls from God do that to a person.

But more than that, it changed his purpose for living. No longer would he persecute the Church but now he would promote it through his own life and ministry especially to the Gentiles. He would literally spend the rest of his life fulfilling that purpose until finally he gave his life for the Gospel in Rome. You see, calls from God do that to a person.

As I thought about Paul, I came to see once again that what was true for him is true for all of us. We too have been “called” by God – called in our baptism when God spoke in His Word and claimed us as His own in Christ. It wasn’t as dramatic as God’s call to Paul but it was just as real nonetheless. For in baptism God made us His children through the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. And He changed us from the inside out. He changed us whether we knew it or understood it or not. He changed us from sinners into saints for the sake of His Son and our Savior, Jesus the Christ, and He made us Christians, members of Christ’s body.

But just as importantly, God changed our purpose for living. Called by God in baptism, we now have a new reason for being. Unlike the world around us, filled with those who live for themselves, we now are called to live for God and for others. And we, like Paul, were given a new mission. That new mission is perhaps best summarized in what is called the “Great Co-Mission” of our Lord – the mission of making disciples for Jesus the Christ by baptizing others in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe everything that he has commanded us.

On this Sunday, as we remember and celebrate the conversion of St. Paul, we are reminded that what God did for him He has done for you and me as well and that the mission He gave to Paul is exactly the same mission He has given to us. We too have been called by God so that we might be His instruments in our day and age, instruments by which others might hear God’s call in their lives as well. In a way, we are God’s telephones – telephones by which He still seeks to reach out and touch people, especially those who still don’t know or believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

As Paul was faithful to his calling, so may God empower us to be faithful to ours as well. God is speaking to us again in His Word and through His Sacraments this day in order to strengthen us in faith and life and to empower us to continue to carry out the mission he gave to Paul and has now entrusted to us.

May God help us all to that end this day for Jesus’ sake. Amen.