



Being Converted to Christ Every Day

TEXT
Acts 9:1-19

May 21, 2017 — Sermon by Dr. Rodger Nishioka

It was several years ago that I was invited to speak at a youth retreat for the Yukon presbytery. This was a gathering for young people and their adult leaders from Presbyterian congregations across Alaska. Because the presbytery did not own a camp and conference center, we rented a camp just outside of Anchorage. The camp was named the “The Gospel, Victory, Bible Camp.” Now “gospel” is a great word. “Victory” is a powerful word. “Bible” is a wonderful word. So is “camp.” But put all those words together, and it makes some Christians a little nervous.

It was Monday morning, and I had just finished my first presentation to the youth and adults. A couple, I found out later the husband and wife who owned the Gospel Victory Bible Camp, came up to me after my first keynote and were very kind. They liked what I had said and how I had communicated with the young people. They seemed curious. “Now, you are all Presbyterians?” they asked.

“Well, I think most of us are,” I told them.

“Certainly there are probably some here who are not.

We’re glad to welcome everyone.” “But YOU are a Presbyterian?” they asked more pointedly.

“Yes, I am,” I confirmed. “Why?”

“Well,” they replied, “because we had heard that Presbyterians didn’t talk about Jesus, and you talked a lot about Jesus.”

“Well, he’s kind of the point,” I replied.

Then they asked me, “So when were you saved?”

“Oh, I’ve always been saved,” I told them. “You see, my parents love God and Jesus Christ, and from my earliest memory, I have known that God loved me and Jesus was my Savior.”

“Yes, but when were you saved?” they asked again.

“Well, if I had to name a day and time, I guess it would be when I was confirmed in our church. That is when I stood up in front of everyone and said that ‘Jesus Christ was my Lord and Savior.’”

“So that’s when you were saved?” they asked.

“Well,” I explained again, “I really believe I have always been saved, but that is a specific time when I proclaimed it to my family and church.”

I will never forget their reply. “Well,” they said. “That’s not good enough.” And they both walked away. What I came to realize in further conversations with them is they had a very specific idea of being saved, of being converted. They believed you could only be saved or converted in a dramatic way.

In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about just such a conversion. Saul hates the Jews who have converted to following Jesus of Nazareth. He hates them so much that he is imprisoning, torturing and even killing them. He hears that this new group of believers is gaining converts in the synagogues in Damascus, so he heads there from Jerusalem.

On the road to Damascus, a great light strikes him blind, and he hears a voice, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Saul asks, “Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Saul arrives in Damascus having to be led by others. Eventually, a courageous follower named Ananias is sent by God to heal Saul, and Saul regains his sight. The fol-

lowing verses tell us that Saul immediately begins preaching about his encounter with Jesus. Eventually, he goes by the Latin version of his name, Paul, and the apostle Paul spreads the gospel throughout Asia and Europe. Thirteen of the New Testament's 27 books are connected to him in some way. It is a powerful and inspiring story of a dramatic conversion. One moment he is terrorizing Christians, and the next moment he is preaching about Jesus. There is such power in these kinds of conversion stories, and I am so grateful for them and for you who have experienced them.

But I must tell you that I have never experienced such a dramatic conversion to Jesus. I call my conversion story not a dramatic one but a nurtured one. I have been consistently nurtured in the faith to follow Jesus. And as I told the couple in Alaska, I do believe it is important that we make a public profession of faith, and for me, that was when I was confirmed in the church. But honestly, when I am asked when I was saved or when I was converted to Jesus Christ, now I tell people that by the grace of God through the Holy Spirit, I am being saved every day. I am being converted every day. It is ongoing and, thanks be to God, never-ending. Of course there have been more significant moments in this nurtured conversion.

When I was 17, the Japanese Presbyterian Church in Seattle, the congregation that raised and nurtured me, suffered a devastating loss. One

of our elders, Taro Sasai, had a sudden heart attack and collapsed and died. He was 42 years old. Everyone knew and loved Taro Sasai. He left behind his wife, Marilyn, a daughter Sharon, who was a little younger than me, and two elementary school age sons, Richard and David.

At his memorial service, our church was packed. We were all grieving. I remember it was the first time I saw my father, who was the pastor, cry during a service. He was heartbroken. All of us were. At the end of the service, just as we were closing, Marilyn, Taro's widow, stood up from the front pew and took Sharon and Richard and David by the hand and came to the front of the sanctuary. She apologized because this was not part of the worship bulletin, but she explained that Taro had just heard this song recently and he loved it and she wondered if we could sing it. She thought that Taro would love it, and she apologized that it had not occurred to her earlier when she and Dad were planning the service.

Of course everyone said we would do whatever she asked. Then Marilyn apologized for her voice and said she was not a good singer, but she started and asked if anyone else knew the song to please join in. Then standing there in front of us, she began to sing:

*How lovely on the mountains
are the feet of him*

*Who brings good news,
good news;*

*Announcing peace, pro-
claiming news of happiness;*

*Our God reigns; our God
reigns! Our God reigns! Our
God reigns! Our God reigns!
Our God reigns! It is from
Isaiah 52.*

I remember standing at the back of the sanctuary and staring at Marilyn Sasai. I remember thinking, Marilyn, you are a widow ten days old. You are holding the hands of your daughter and two sons, and you have the courage to sing in front of all of us, "Our God reigns." I remember deciding in that moment, "I have faith, but I do not have what you have. I am going to spend the rest of my life trying to get that." It was not a dramatic conversion. My life did not experience a 180 degree change. But right then, I was converted to Jesus even more. Right then, I was saved even more.

Let me be clear. Whether you have experienced a dramatic conversion or a nurtured conversion or a combination of the two, it is God who saves. It is God who converts. It is God who causes us to be born again; and because it is God's work, no one, no one, has the right to tell you that is not good enough. If it is good enough for God, it is always good enough.

A former student and now a friend of mine is serving as a pastor in Nashville. When someone asks him, "When were you born again?" he genuinely and gratefully answers, "Nearly two thousand years ago, the moment Jesus Christ died on the cross." I love that.

When someone asks me when I was saved or when I was converted, I tell them by the grace of God I am being saved and I am being converted every day.

Whether your faith story is more like the apostle Paul or whether your faith story is more like my own, you need not live in fear that it is not good enough — because it is by God’s grace that we are saved. It is by God’s grace that we are born again. It is by God’s grace that we are converted to Jesus. That is why we are able to sing with confidence, “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, and like the Apostle Paul, I was blind but now I see!” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.