
Converting Rabbi Saul" "Converting Today's Terrorists

A Sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith
Pentecost 19C
Mikell Chapel

In the name of God: Our Creator, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen.

[Jesus said] "I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15.10)

Good morning. Did you know it's the beginning of the Jewish New Year? It's called "Rosh Hashanah," and our Jewish friends celebrated it on Thursday this past week. As usual in the "high holy days" Rosh Hashanah was soon followed by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. That's the day observant Jews repent of their sins committed in the past year. Now Yom Kippur will be observed next weekend, just one week into the New Year.

Wow!" an abrupt shift, isn't it?" from festive Rosh Hashanah to penitent Yom Kippur all in one week. So it's not surprising there are jokes to lighten things up a little. And as we know there's a great tradition of Jewish humor. But the following joke also bears an interesting connection to our key verse" the key verse from the Christian scriptures appointed for today. That verse pictures God in heaven reacting to our repentance on earth, like the penitence of Jews on Yom Kippur. Here's the verse we already invoked:

"I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15.10)

Now the joke goes that there was a rabbi who was "fed up" with his congregation. It happened around the time of Yom Kippur that year.

So he decided to skip the services on Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, and instead go play golf. Now Moses" the great prophet who spoke to God face-to-face when he was alive on earth" Moses was looking down from heaven and saw the rabbi on the golf course.

Naturally he reported it to God and suggested God punish the rabbi severely.

But as he watched, Moses saw the rabbi playing the best game he'd ever played! The rabbi got a hole-in-one on the toughest hole on the course" the most coveted achievement for all golf players!

So Moses turned to God and asked, "I thought you were going to punish him!

You call this punishment?"

God replied, "But he is being punished! How can he tell anyone that he played his best game ever on the day when he was supposed to be in the synagogue for Yom Kippur? Who else will ever know? (Adapted 9/11/2010 by this author at www.harryc.com/j-jokes04-rh-yk.htm#8)

Oh well, there you have it. Of course it's just a joke! Nobody wants a God who punishes people precisely by giving them what they want" but with a twist! None of us want that to be our orthodox theology, right? But that's the kind of Jewish humor you can find to lighten up the high holy days.

As it happens there was another major religious observance last week. You may know that on Friday our Muslim friends marked the end of their long fast. Like our Lenten fast of several weeks, Muslims observe thirty days of Ramadan. And as usual Ramadan ended with the more festive observance called "Eid" "spelled "E-i-d."

But the next day after Eid was yesterday; and yesterday, of course, well; Saturday was September 11th, which we now routinely abbreviate with the expression, "9-11." That was the day we all recall, nine years ago now in 2001, when the twin towers of the World Trade Center fell in New York City, because terrorists on a suicide mission flew airplanes into the sides of the buildings, and created what we now know as "ground zero."

But connected with all that there's a final convergence provided by our scriptures appointed for today. In today's reading from the 1st Timothy we hear St. Paul make a related confession about his past as Rabbi Saul. Indeed we're reminded that before he became a disciple of Christ Paul was himself was a kind of "terrorist" a persecutor who terrorized the Christian community of his day.

Recall these two passages from the Book of Acts:

But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison (Acts 8.3);

and

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9.1-2).

Now you may be more familiar with this version of the apostle's confession, often read from his 1st Letter to the Corinthians:

Last of all, as to someone untimely born, [Jesus] appeared also to me [after he appeared to other apostles]. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. (1 Corinthians 15.8-10)

Of course we have already heard from 1st Timothy today this related confession:

Christ Jesus our Lord . . . appointed me to his service . . . even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

[For] The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" of whom I am the foremost.

But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim. 1.12-16)

So let us add to last week's convergence of Jewish and Muslim holy days, and our national observance of 9-11, today's remarkable opportunity to explore the grace of God in the terms that St. Paul affirmed so many centuries ago, and that our gospel declares in that key scripture for today:

"I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15.10)

In light of these scriptures, what would it take for our terrorists in the world today to create such joy in the presence of God by their repentance? Or consider: how is the grace of God operating in the world today to achieve for our terrorists the kind of conversion so remarkably manifested in the conversion of Rabbi Saul into St. Paul?

"For that very reason I received mercy," today's scripture says of Paul, "so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example [repeat: an example] to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1.16.)

So how is this example of our Lord's grace operating in the world today? Christian friends, I'm afraid there is only one

orthodox answer to that question; a very daunting answer. Indeed, I myself am almost too timid to tell you what is spiritually obvious: that the only theology adequate to that question involves ourselves"our faith and witness.

For we are the ones in the world today who have "come to believe in [Jesus] for eternal life," as 1st Timothy puts it. And "eternal life" is not just some ethereal afterlife but the power of resurrection that we experience already in this life"the power of original creation, of renewed creation, and of new life arising from death and dying.

Thus St. Paul is for us *that* kind of example. He is not *for others* such an example, for others who have not come to believe. Rather he is for us the foremost example of "Jesus Christ displaying the utmost patience' in a quest to save, convert and transform a notorious "man of violence."

So what would it take for us, the church, to fulfill that apostolic destiny: to believe in such an example of divine patience and grace that we could be the instruments of conversion and transformation in the world of terrorism and violence today?

Now this may also be obvious: to believe that "'men of violence,' such as Rabbi Saul was before his conversion, can be saved and transformed is to believe also something about ourselves. It is to believe that wherever we ourselves need the enduring and patient mercy of God it will be there for us no matter what it takes. And it is to rely on others to be holding-out for"and praying for"our conversion with the same patience and persistence as the grace of God provided for Rabbi Saul until he became St. Paul.

Or it is to extend the same grace of patience and persistence provided by the good shepherd in today's first parable, who leaves ninety-nine sheep who are already safe, and goes after the one lost sheep who still needs saving. And it is to extend the same grace of patience and persistence provided by the woman who is not content that she still has nine silver coins, but searches diligently until she finds that one lost coin"leaving not even one of them lost. (Notice there're a lot of nines in our preaching for today, aren't there?)

Can we become such a persistent prayer force in the world today? I recall that our own Community of the Cross of Nails here at the Cathedral used to pray and distribute "'prayers for our enemies.' These included yellow prayer cards that said, "Bless Our Enemies," including a prayer for Osama bin Laden. I even found one such prayer still on the internet although written nine years ago, immediately following that day in September, 2001, and invoking some of the same convictions expressed above:

Surely, Lord [the prayer goes], if You could move the heart of Saul of Tarsus, one of the greatest persecutors of peace-loving people of his day, You can move the heart of Osama Bin Laden. Just as Saul of Tarsus became St. Paul of the New Testament and converted many to follow the path of peace, I am begging You to convert Osama Bin Laden to become St. Osama. Let him preach peaceful means of addressing problems. Let him understand that killing or injuring unsuspecting civilians is not the way of Allah; that such actions are anathema to the will of Allah. And let him convince others of these truths.

I'm not asking his conversion to any specific religion, Lord [the prayer continues] "'-in fact he would have the most influence for good as a Muslim. I am asking that You move his heart so that he preaches non-violence. For his voice would have a far greater impact on the Islamic enemies of peace than my voice or that of any westerner. And I pray that You move the hearts of others high in terrorist circles to the same end. (Steffen O'Sullivan, "A Prayer for Osama bin Laden," accessed by this author on 9/11/2020 at www.panix.com/~sos/binladen.html)

Amen. So now: I invite us to contemplate what a cascade of such prayers in the church and in the world could accomplish. Imagine what we might achieve if we were persistently and energetically flooding the spiritual air waves with such prayers and petitions on behalf of today's terrorists?

Now that may feel like a heavy burden to bear for the peace and welfare of today's world. But I discern it is the kind of apostolic burden that would delight the apostle on behalf of so many zealots in the world today"men of violent religion' like he was in his day.

But let's turn now to the wisdom of lightening things up after such a heavy focus on the penitence and prayer warfare needed today. Returning now to our opening theme let us find encouragement in the spirit of the Jewish New Year. Thus I invite you now to receive the following Rosh Hashanah blessings with characteristic Jewish humor.

In this new year that now begins”

May you be blessed with good neighbors who are there for you when you need them, and who are not around too much when you don't need them . . .

May your hair, your teeth, your facelift and your stocks not fall; and may your blood pressure, your cholesterol and your mortgage interest rate not rise.

May the world enjoy a year that is free of hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, drought, and political speeches, which produce the most wind of all . . .

May God give you the strength to go through a year of [congressional] campaigning, and may some of the promises made be kept.

May you believe at least half of what the candidates propose, and may those elected fulfill at least half of what they promise, and [may] the miracle of reducing taxes and balancing budgets happen.

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May you have a spouse, or a child or a friend, or a grandchild, who loves you, even though they really know you . . .

And may you [remember] . . . that God loves you, that is why He made you just a little bit lower than the angels . . .

May your children or your grandchildren receive a good report in school, and may you receive a good report too, from your dentist . . . your dermatologist . . . your cardiologist . . . your gastroenterologist . . . and ultimately . . . from your God.

May there be peace this year between the Jews of Israel and the Arabs, and may there also be peace between the Jews of Israel, which sometimes seems much more difficult to achieve . . .

And may the Messiah come this year and, if he does not, may we live as if he has . . . (www.harryc.com/j-jokes04-rh-yk.htm#8).

And now, as disciples of Christ, we pray for all this,

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.