
The Urgency of Conversion: Just Believe and Watch!

A sermon by the Rev. Ricardo Bailey
Easter 5 – Year B

I grew up in Atlanta right on the edge of DeKalb County. As a matter of fact, where I grew up was very close to East Lake Country Club. The house that I lived in was a typical Southern home: it was a revolving door! Relatives came and relatives came back. Like the Dean said about a year ago in a sermon he preached (and I am paraphrasing), "...when it comes to children they never leave, they ALWAYS come back!" Well, that is the way it was at my house.

One of my relatives, a cousin, was one of the most colorful of my relatives! He was always in trouble. I thought that he was an intimate friend of the DeKalb County Police Department because he was routinely leaving the jail or being picked up to go back to it.

One morning when I was on my way to school, I noticed that my grandmother had once again let my cousin into the house. He had been with us for a few months after being released from Jail. Well, one morning on my way to school, I noticed that my grandmother's flowerbed had some unusually tall plants growing in it.

Needless to say, I returned home – *and if you think that the mother who you saw on TV last week beating the living heck out of her son during the Baltimore riots was an event, BABY* – you should've seen Big Mama going in on her grandchild; because even though Jesus speaks to us about bearing fruit that will last – my cousin was trying to produce some "fruit" that would last too! He was growing weed in her flowerbed! Money Mayweather and Pacman's fight had nothing on what I saw that day came back home!

Please know that I am not preaching about the growth, distribution, or commerce of weed; but I believe that my home experienced a Jesus moment because by my grandmother's removal of that weed branch, there was no production of "fruit" from those branches at all!

If you look at all of our readings for today, one could develop a common thread as a theme and I would say that the theme is that there is an urgency to get things right with God! One could immediately say that this would be a good time for some fire and brimstone preaching! We need to let people know that life is not always mashed potatoes and gravy, right?

I believe that Jesus is making it plain and simple for us today! If we separate ourselves from him, then it is impossible for us to have any true and sustainable results. Believe me when I say this, I am not excluding anyone from the salvation that is abundantly available for all of us, but for those of us who bear the name of Christian – we must remember that Jesus is the center of our joy and as the one who is the way to the Father, as the one who is full of the truth that the world needs to hear, and as the one who assures us of the promise of eternal life – we cannot expect ourselves to achieve true conversion and a true change in our lives without a relationship with God!

Yes, self-help books, daytime TV shows like *The Chew*, *The View*, *The Real...* (you can tell that I've been on paternity leave, huh?) can give nice advice, but if you really want to "chew," "view," and experience what is "real" in this life, then let God in and see what wonderful work you and I can do for his greater glory and for our greater good!

Therefore, how would you define "conversion?" As Christians, we will probably come up with a few explanations to bring home what the meaning of the word really means. However, I would submit that a conversion is an experience that can be defined as a historical event. It can be defined as an ongoing event. It can also be defined as a transforming event that many

of us experience in the here and now.

The power of God's love for us which is defined in our second reading this morning from the First Letter of John makes it clear that the very essence of our God is love! I hope that we all heard that today. God is telling his church something today and I pray that we all get the message that God's love is not the "love" that the world attempts to give! This is a radical love that makes no sense to people who think that they have experienced true love. This is a love that says it like Jennifer Holiday back in the '70's:

"...I'm not living without you, I'm not living without you! I don't want to be friends! I'm staying! I'm staying! And you; and you; and you; you're gonna love me!"

(Jennifer Holiday, "Dreamgirls")

Our first reading illustrates the importance of spreading the Gospel and the urgency of being converted! The main event in that reading is the acceptance of the faith by the Ethiopian eunuch after being approached by Philip! After hearing Philip explain to him what it was and who it was about that he was reading in the book of the prophet Isaiah, those blessed words by the Ethiopian eunuch was spoken:

"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Lord, have mercy! Listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today! We must truly be about the business of making Jesus increase in every aspect of our lives. It is then that people will begin to see, hear, and accept the testimony of our faith and see the good fruit that we will bear for the greater glory of God! To be a follower of Christ really means that Easter is a way of life for every one of us! Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again! The paschal mystery is celebrated by the Church every day and in every way that the saints of God gather together in prayer, in praise, and in petition!

God is glorified in our transformation! God is glorified in our conversion! God is glorified in our acceptance of each other! God is glorified in the fruit that we bear when we continue to abide in him!

So, you may ask, what happened to the cousin who grew the weed in your grandmother's flowerbed. Church, I tell you, good news! My grandmother died and I buried her. However, at the funeral mass all of my relatives who I had seen come in and out of our doors when I was a child were there. My cousin, who caused so much trouble and who got into so much trouble was there. And when I saw him get out of the car, he had no chains. The chains of addiction were gone. The chains of drugs were gone. The chains of being the property of the State of Georgia were gone. He was clean from head to toe and it wasn't just for the event of my grandmother's funeral. He had been clean for over 15 years!

What a gift! Not just for my grandmother because I believed that she believed in her grandchild! This was proof to me – the educated brother, the guy with three degrees and the theological training – that God is able, that God is faithful, and that no matter what seeds we may plant in this life, God has a better green-thumb and the seeds that he has planted into you and me will bear fruit. Just have faith to believe and watch!