

Have you been converted? Are you open to being converted today? If these questions send shivers up your spine as you look around to see if you can slide out of the pew discreetly, then take a breath, you are probably in good company. Most of us when we think of conversion have images of televangelists or pushy Christians on the street corners, of people who think they know everything and want the whole world to be just like them. One woman recounting her journey says, “I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian – or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut.” There is all sorts of baggage and resistance related to conversion. It feels like someone trying to get us to do or believe something we don’t want and we certainly don’t like being bossed around.

Conversion is not a word we mainline Christians are very comfortable with. We’ve seen and maybe even experienced its oppressive and stifling nature. But conversion really means to transform or to change – not to conform.

The story in Acts today is about conversion, but maybe not the kind of conversion we think at first glance. On this day, while Peter was preaching, right there in the middle of his sermon, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. Peter stopped preaching. This was amazing and surprising, even astounding, because the Spirit was poured out *even* on the Gentiles.

If you read Sandi Guy’s e-devotion this week, then you are well ahead of the game on the story that precedes our text for today. You know that in fact, this moment did not come out of nowhere – that the Holy Spirit was working pretty hard to get to this point.

Let’s re-trace Her steps and see what the Holy Spirit has been up to. First we meet one of these said Gentiles, Cornelius. Cornelius was from Caesarea, a centurion in the military, a devout man who feared God, gave generously and prayed constantly. He had a vision that God had received his alms and prayers and then told him to send servants to Joppa for a man named Peter. Amazingly, he did it.

Meanwhile in Joppa, we have Peter, a Jewish man, follower of Jesus, preacher, healer, leader, having received gifts from the Holy Spirit. He goes up to a rooftop to pray. He starts to pray but then gets really hungry and falls into a trance. Thank goodness that God uses all opportunities, even low blood sugar. In the trance he sees the heavens open and a large sheet comes down – like a picnic blanket - filled with creatures – mammals, reptiles, birds. A voice says, “Peter, kill and eat.” Being a good Jew, Peter responds, “No! I’ve *never* eaten anything unclean or profane.” The voice replied – “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” And then everything disappears. Not surprisingly, Peter, having now lost his appetite, is puzzled.

While he is standing there, still puzzled, two men interrupt and say, *Hey, we’re looking for a man named Peter.* As Peter wonders why they are here, he hears the Spirit tell him to go ahead and follow these men. So he responds, *Yes, that’s me. Why are you here?* And they say, *Cornelius sent us. He loves God and had a vision to send for you and hear what you have to say.*

The next day they traveled together to Caesarea. By the time they got there Cornelius had assembled his family and friends – Gentiles, of course. Peter is still confused. He begins by saying, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile....(and then suddenly the dream begins to make sense to him), but God has shown me

that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So, why am I here again?" (Okay, so maybe he still doesn't quite get it). Cornelius tells him about his vision and asks Peter to speak with them.

Peter then proceeds to tell the good news of Jesus. He opens by assuring them, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality..." But let's be honest. We kind of want God to show partiality – to us. You've seen the bumper sticker – "Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite?" I imagine Peter was still thinking similar things about his God.

And then mid-sentence, we have our passage for today. Before he can even finish his thoughts.... the Holy Spirit is at it again – why does She always seem to be ahead of him!?

Peter, after all hadn't even finished his point. He hadn't even built up the case enough for these Gentiles to make a decision to get on board, and the Holy Spirit fell on them – even *them* - anyway.

And, besides the fact that these are the wrong people, this is the wrong order for conversion! First comes confession of faith, then baptism, then the coming of the Spirit. This is all wrong!

But the damage is done. Theologian Will Willimon writes, "Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, 'what is God doing, where on earth is God going now?'" The Spirit is out, and all Peter can do is breathlessly catch up. "Well," he sighs, "can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" A rhetorical question, I suppose. No one responds, and they are all baptized. And Peter is invited to stay with them for several days.

But I wonder, who was truly converted in this story? Who was transformed, saw things in a new way, even changed? The Gentiles....or Peter? Or, maybe, both. Could it be that all the characters in the story needed to be converted?

This is a different way to think about conversion. Usually one person is converting another person, and God is involved in some way, of course. But in this story, all the characters are quite passive – they respond to dreams and visions, but don't really know what they're doing, and it's not clear who is teaching whom. The Holy Spirit is doing most of the work – and maybe even converting them both in the process.

Sometimes at The Night Ministry we have groups of people who unexpectedly show up at the outreach program to evangelize – really, to convert. They bring God as if God did not already exist on that street corner, and strike up conversations with our homeless and hungry neighbors and try to get them to see the light – which, of course, is their particular brand of religion. We politely encourage them to move on.

Because any conversion that is happening on that street corner is a two way street. One person is not changing the other. We are changed by each other. Pastor Timothy Safford so beautifully articulates this mutuality as he writes, "We are not hosts at God's table; we are guests ourselves. We aren't called to welcome as much as to act like we have been welcome ourselves into the grace of God.....We are all beggars hungry for the bread of God, telling the other beggars where the bread may be found."

And together, we beggars, eat together, laugh together, sometimes pray together, often cry together, and always try to hope together. And I do believe we have *all* been converted in the process. Over and over again.

Because conversion is not a one time event, it's a process and it keeps happening. Which means we need to stay engaged, we need to be open to being transformed and changed even as we share and live the good news we believe in. We need to see that the Holy Spirit is working -

even in “**them.**” And, let’s not forget that in this story in Acts, **we** are the **them.** Much of the book of Acts is about whether we Gentiles can be part of this community of the faithful. How quickly we forget our own position and begin withholding the water, the grace, the love from others and passing judgment about who the Spirit of God may or may not fall on.

And this is why we are a people constantly in need of conversion. As Shane Claiborne writes, “people who are marked by the renewing of their minds and imaginations, who no longer conform to the pattern that is destroying our world. Otherwise we have only believers, not converts. And believers are a dime a dozen nowadays. What the world needs is people who believe so much in another world that they cannot help but enact it.”

Peter and those Gentiles, through their Spirit-filled interactions with each other, have come to believe in another world – a world where the barriers between them are torn down and together they breathlessly run after the Spirit and live together as the people of God.

Do we believe that another world is possible, and are we willing to be transformed in order for that world to become a reality?

And if we do believe that the Holy Spirit is descending today – yes, even on **us**, are we open to being converted?