

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle/January 29, 2017

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This morning we celebrate the conversion of Saint Paul with gratitude. We are grateful for the light and vision of the risen Christ. We are grateful for transformation, Paul's and our own. We are grateful for life's adventure and the values that guide us. And finally we are grateful for community that we share together.

When Paul speaks of the church of God he is thinking of the many gatherings as united in one community, not an institution. The Bible does not think of the church in such a fixed and established way. Paul does not collect offerings for a corporation or an establishment. And today some of us do not like to think of giving to an institution. We want our gifts to go to something more dynamic.

So I want us to think of the church as the Bible does, simply as "the Way." In Luke's account of the sending out of disciples, Jesus instructs them: "Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves" (Luke 10: 3). Jesus is the way of peace (Luke 1: 79). His is the way of truth (2 Peter 2: 2). Jesus opened "the new and living way" to God (Hebrews 10: 20). Jesus said of himself, "I am the way" (John 14: 6). And so Christianity and the Church came to be designated as the Way.

It is a day of gratitude. I am grateful today for all we have done and given to support Saint Paul's in the coming year; not to prop up an institution but to provide for one another, and especially those to come, as we journey on the Way of peace. I am grateful for pledges not so much to turn on the lights and repair the stonework, as to open up for us and others the Way of truth. I

am grateful for generous contributions not as dues that turn our attention inward to what we can get, but as offerings that open our hands and hearts to the new and living Way that seeks God's will for the wellbeing of all. The church is the Way to new beginnings. I am grateful for Room at the Inn ministry at Saint Paul's that, after helping St. Martin's Church settle their Syrian refugee family, welcomed the Mwajuma family to Philadelphia one day before all immigrations into this country were halted by executive order.

The church as the Way is marked by light and vision. In our prayer that we call the collect we are thankful for the light of the Gospel that has shined throughout the world illumined by Paul's preaching. Paul himself encountered that light brighter than the midday sun when its beams are most intense. It was the light of Christ and the vision was of Jesus both wounded and glorified. Paul was convinced that he had seen the risen Jesus in a transformed body. God raised him from wounds that killed him. Jesus showed that God's love is stronger than death. God's power is made perfect in weakness. And that the transformative grace of God's compassion is ours through faith not by our own design, not by self-taking but by self-giving. We give thanks for the light of love and vision of new life.

The church as the Way is a place of transformation. We are all about what is life-giving in the moment. Paul's earlier life in Judaism was a violent reaction to the Christian claim that all were God's people through faith along with Jews. Paul's transformation was from a violent opponent of the Way of Jesus to a nonviolent proponent of this Way, a Way that overcame divisions and led to peace. We are all transformed in our encounter with Jesus. For some this transformation leads to greater trust. For others it is greater assurance and less fear. For still others it is heightened creativity and the ability to be playful. There is transformation going on all the time as our church sets us on Jesus' way.

To be honest the Way is a heroic adventure. Jesus is clear about the nature of this path. It will have danger and risk. "So be wise as serpents," he said, "and innocent as doves." Paul endured criticism from every side.

Christians doubted his teaching and commission. He countered that it came from Christ. The synagogue rejected that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. Paul claimed that his vision of a resurrected, wounded and glorified Christ made it so. His adventure took him around the Mediterranean and finally at the end to Rome.

On a weekend when it has become impossible to immigrate into the United States, Jesus' Way at Saint Paul's allows us to participate in the Mwajuma family's adventure. It was a frightening flight for their lives out of the Congo. "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves." They made their way to a refugee camp in South Africa where they lived for seven years. Here at Saint Paul's a group called "Room at the Inn" was formed to help resettle refugees. At first this group supported Saint Martin's Church to resettle their refugee family. And then, one day before the nation's borders were closed to all refugees, the Mwajuma family arrived in Philadelphia. The Christian Way is an adventure.

The church, not as institution but as the way of Jesus, is not without direction, though sometimes it can be confusing. The way may take unpredictable turns and lead to challenges that perplex us. We take our bearings from the values we hold. We believe in new life. We believe in overcoming divisions and barriers. We put our trust in compassion. At the very start, at baptism we trust in prayer, resist evil, tell the story of Jesus and his love, seek and serve Christ in all persons, and respect the dignity of every human being. No we are not directionless.

Finally, we have one another and we have God. We are in communion. Jesus says to each one of us when we are worried beyond words, "the Spirit of your Father" in heaven will speak through you. This is rather remarkable, but that's what it means to follow Jesus' Way. God is so close to us that the Spirit works through us to give meaning and words when no words seem possible. And we are close to one another. Paul in another letter says the members of the Way "have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer

together... if one member is honored, all rejoice together..." No one is alone. We are all in community.

We all have much to be grateful for. We celebrate Paul who encouraged donations for those in need who were on the Way. It was a matter of gratitude. Our pledges and gifts are to open up the Way for one another and others. Our gifts take care of the place where we find unconquerable light, and vision is renewed week by week. Today is a day of gratitude. We meet Jesus here and our life is transformed. Jesus sends us on a real life adventure with values to guide us. It all happens in this place at the heart of which is gratitude. And we walk together with Christ's Spirit moving through us. Though the way be dangerous and lead us to strange lands, though the way take us to an uncertain future, though the way be joyful or the way be sad, we have one another. We are not alone. We are in communion on a way that leads us into life. And for this and so many other reasons, this day is a day of gratitude.

*Amen.*