

Sermon 011517 Wisdom
Scripture 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9
Sermon Title- Growing Up

This is the second Sunday of the Epiphany. Because of the storm last week, we didn't hear of the Magi story in Matthews Gospel and the 'Aha!' moment that they, and we, share in the realization that the baby Jesus is the Messiah. Other Epiphany stories include the miracle at the wedding in Cana and the baptism of Jesus as realization moments that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. The Epiphany season is called the 'season of light.' It is the time of illumination that the Christ has arrived in the world. Christianity abounds with stories of individual experiences of accepting Christ into their lives. These are called by some 'born again' experiences. So, in this Epiphany season, I'd like to spend some time on this notion of having your life illuminated.

If you are, ahem, of a certain age you will remember the name Chuck Colson. Chuck Colson was central figure in the Watergate scandal in the early 1970's. He ended up going to prison for his role in the break-in and cover-up that brought down the presidency of Richard Nixon. The article was actually an interview with Colson in which he told the story of his 'born again' experience while in prison. After his release, Colson started a Christian prison ministry that is the model for all Christian prison ministries since. He is still at it all these years later. It is quite an inspirational story. It is a story about paying your debt to society and of getting a second chance and making the most of it.

Tony Dungy is the former head coach of the Indianapolis Colts. Dungy's Colts won the Superbowl in the 2006 season. Dungy retired from coaching, does some studio commentating on Sunday Night Football and works in Christian Prison Ministry, which is modeled after Colson's work. One of the prisoners that Dungy visited was Michael Vick. Vick was an immensely gifted quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, when he was caught sponsoring and running a dog-fighting ring. The stories that came out of the investigation were of hideous treatment of the dogs, including killing dogs in the most inhumane ways that lost fights. Vick served a year and a half in federal prison. He met frequently with Tony Dungy while incarcerated.

The most famous second chance in the Bible is about the man who wrote the letter to the Corinthians that we just heard. St. Paul was named Saul when he persecuted Christians. St. Stephan, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death at the hands of Saul and others. Then after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Saul was on the road to Damascus when a light from heaven knocked him down. Saul had a vision of Jesus who called him to stop persecuting Christians and in fact made Saul, "the chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles." (Acts 9: 15) Saul's name was changed to Paul and he became the greatest evangelist in the history of Christianity. Paul got his second chance and made the most of it.

Call it what you will, born again, redemption, seeing the light, second chance, whatever; these are only a few stories of many, many who had their lives changed dramatically and suddenly by Jesus Christ. Each story is dramatic and unique, and real to those who experience them. It is, however, something that has never happened to me. I do not believe that one needs a ‘born again’ experience in order to have a life lived in deep Christian faith.

I have heard conversion stories told many times. One thing that I have become aware of in ‘born again’ testimonies is that the same people tell the same stories of the same experience over and over again. They speak of their pre-conversion time of sinning not having God in their lives, and speak of now being right with God, being ‘born again.’ Now, I do not doubt the importance of the revelation story in their lives, but I always ask myself the same question, “Why haven’t they any new stories?” I ask, “Haven’t they ever met Jesus since that one time?”

My experience is that there is not only religious experience in the past tense, but religious experience is to be had in the present as well. I have every expectation that the future holds religious experiences as well. Isn’t life a process of being lost and then found, and then lost and then being found all over again? Even when we have our stories of terrible things that we may have done in the past and then we have seen the light that does not mean that we stop sinning. We do not lose the need for God once we have found God. People are always leaving and

joining churches, finding new connections with life's great mysteries, then losing them. The matter of Christian growth then seems to be about a willingness to be open to the presence of God, to be ready for new opportunities to find Christ in our lives. To me, the experience of faith is not a one shot deal to be preserved like cologne that is to be brought out and sniffed on occasion.

Being a Christian is not just about making a proclamation. Being a Christian is about growing older and wiser. It is about the growth of our souls and having epiphanies over and again. It is spiritual *growth* that we need if we are to carry the title of Christian. It is the growth in our own personal development, the growth in our spiritual personalities, the spiritual growth that it requires us to live out our discipleship in an often harsh and complicated world.

With all respect to those who have dramatic 'born again' type experiences, Christianity is not a once in a lifetime realization. Christianity is a journey of striving and stretching... to grow into the person that God wants us to be. It is about the process of seeking spiritual maturity. It is about growing in our faith. It is about preparing ourselves for the call of Jesus to serve in the world that He both served and saved. This, then, is about the growth of the soul. We can also describe this as a growth of wisdom.

This growth of the soul, this growth of wisdom, involves knowledge but is not really about knowledge. The truth is that most

people of faith lack knowledge of the Bible and Christian Theology. Even people who like to quote passages of scripture, I find, lack a fundamental understanding of what is really at stake in the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. It comes as no surprise as most Christians have little or no Christian education in their lives.

The truth is that Bible knowledge helps but is not central to the growth of the soul, the growth of wisdom. The experience of God, the life of faith, can be deep and rich without great knowledge of the Bible and theology. In Paul's most famous chapter in First Corinthians he writes, "When I was a child I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." He is speaking of growing up, growing his soul, directing his life toward God in Jesus Christ. He is speaking of growing in wisdom, growing in love, growing in faith, growing in hope.

When all is said and done, this whole notion of epiphany, of illumination is about a light going on... not above your head like a cartoon picture of having a thought, but a light going on inside you. We are speaking of an interior process, including for some people when the process starts with a dramatic conversion experience. Wisdom involves the heart, the soul, and the mind. We are talking about attitudes and opportunities, about not being directed by *our wills*, but by *God's Spirit*. It is the unexplained gift of God himself. It is the gift of grace that gives

us the capacity to cope, to act justly, to hope, to help. Let us grow up in the light of God's Spirit through Jesus Christ. AMEN