

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

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It's safe to say that all of us, at one time or another, have said one thing but known better otherwise. While truth ultimately liberates us, the path to awareness and acceptance of truth can be quite difficult. We may know what is just and right deep down inside of our very being, but find it awfully difficult to live in accordance with what we know to be true.

We hear a lot today about living our authentic selves. While I don't doubt that we all have a fundamental desire to live honest and authentic lives, I am not so sure we're always prepared for the implications of what that really means for us. And to be completely transparent, I often wrestle with this myself. In fact, I think you can't quite seriously embrace the Christian life without embracing the cross and renouncing all that holds us back from loving the true, the good, the beautiful: Jesus Christ.

If we are to embrace the cross and follow Jesus, then we must turn from those things that prevent us from loving God and neighbour. The Christian Tradition names this process of turning away from sin and evil "conversion," from the Latin word *conversio* meaning to turn about. Not limited to the "spiritual" aspect of the human person, the process of conversion involves the whole person: mind, body, and spirit. It is a process of growing in love — love for God and love for neighbour.

The Scriptures and spiritual writers of every age acknowledge the process of conversion as a difficult one. Among the most well-known accounts of a person's conversion story and ascent to faith is St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Admittedly not a terribly easy read, the *Confessions* is a book worth reading and reflecting upon. In it, Augustine tells his life story and his journey of faith, and his confession — or profession — of the Christian faith and way of life.

Having led university students in a close read of the text, I can assure you Augustine's story and teaching still speaks powerfully to women and men

today; it certainly provokes conversation about sin and conversion. The honesty with which Augustine accounts of his life and the difficult process by which he ascended to Christian life speaks well to our own experience. Augustine reveals that although the conversion process may demand considerable self-examination and honesty, the acceptance of truth and the Christian way of life brings about tremendous freedom. No longer are we bound by what is hidden and secret, but free to live as the sons and daughters of the God who made us.

While not everyone may find Augustine's conversion story easy to read, a more contemporary work of literature offers a wonderful illustration of the difficult process of conversion to truth and freedom. *The Great Divorce*, written by the English writer C.S. Lewis., tells a tale of shadowy ghost-like persons on a bus from Hell to Heaven. The book offers an allegorical account of the process of conversion.

A gift from a dear friend, I read *The Great Divorce* while in university and I still vividly recall a passage from the book. While I won't go into much detail as you can [read the story online](#) or [in print](#), the narrator tells readers of a ghost with a lizard perched on his shoulder. It is clear that the lizard is no friend to the ghost, but a nagging and controlling figure.

The ghost encounters a bright and vivid figure, whom we suppose is an angel, who asks the ghost whether or not he would like him to remove the lizard from his shoulder and liberate him from the lizard's demanding and obsessive control. Despite the ghost's yearning to be free of the lizards' pervasive pull, he can't quite let go of fear of what may happen to him. However, after much anguished internal torment and fearful yearning to be free, the ghost relents and permits the angel to remove the lizard from his shoulder.

Much to the ghost's dismay, the fiery conversion causes pain. In the end, however, it also brings about a glorious transformation by which the ghost becomes a new man, and the lizard into a horse upon which the man rides into Heaven. No longer does the man's passions withhold him from living life to the full.

Conversion is indeed no easy process for any of us. And it is not a singular, one-time experience or event in our Christian life. While you and I might recall a particularly moving experience by which our hearts and minds were turned toward the Living God, if we're really honest with ourselves, we need to acknowledge our sinfulness daily. Together with the Psalmist we pray daily, "For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (Psalm 51:3) always mindful that the Lord "restores my soul and leads me in the paths of righteousness." (Psalm 23:3)

The liturgical season that we now call Lent was in the early Church a period of preparation for women and men seeking Baptism at Easter. Over the course of several weeks, the candidates — or catechumens — would receive instruction in the faith and undergo examination so the Christian community could discern their readiness for Baptism. The scripture lessons we read today were also the same lessons read by Christians on this particular Sunday as early as the third and fourth centuries. This Sunday was the Sunday on which the catechumens were asked to renounce their former ways and to embrace the Way of Life.

Although we might be tempted to think our Gospel reading is about the blind man, particularly in light of the reading from Ephesians, I suggest the story is really about the Pharisees and the crowds who couldn't accept the healing of the blind man. This is not a story of about physical sight, but our willingness to see things as God sees them. This is a story about knowing what is true, but refusing to believe it because the truth shatters our preconceived notions and beliefs and challenges our way of life.

I suggested in the beginning of this sermon that there are occasions in our life when we know what is true and good, but we do otherwise. This gospel story illustrates such an occasion. And perhaps with a bit of irony, it is not Jesus who confronts the blindness of the crowds and Pharisees, but a blind man who was healed by Jesus. Notice how Jesus seemingly fades into the background in this passage, only appearing at the beginning and end.

The Pharisees and crowds were so resistant to accepting Jesus' message and works that they grew obstinate in the face of truth. A man who was once

blind stands before them and testifies to the healing power of God in Christ. Yet what do the Pharisees and crowds do? They question whether the man is who he says he is: "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Imagine what must've gone through the healed man's mind upon hearing such a question. How insulting it must've been for the man when the Pharisees later questioned his parents of his true identity!

Although we may laugh at the Pharisee's and crowd's bull-headed resistance to the truth, we must not forget the times in our life when we've resisted the truth. How often do we deny the truth because it might reveal something which we have kept hidden for so long? How frequently do we ignore the guidance of others simply because we do not wish to face the demands of reality? Or how often do we turn away from God and fall prey to sin rather than walk the difficult Way of Life, a path that may demand us to take up the cross?

I've been giving this considerable thought in the past weeks. While like so many of you I am tired and worn of hearing about COVID-19, I couldn't help but consider some people's reaction to this virus in February. Despite warnings from scientists and medical leaders from around the world, political pundits and even world leaders dismissed the virus as something like the flu. I read and heard lines such as "don't forget, many people die from diseases such as the flu" or "sure many people will die, but this will pass and we just have to accept it." Such reactions were not simply ignorant and flippant, but much like the Pharisees' reaction in our gospel lesson today, they were outright denials of the truth. Now countless countries and millions of people suffer and die because of some people's pride and unwillingness to accept truth.

This is why confession of sin is so integral to the process of conversion and redemption. We confess our sins not to make ourselves feel bad, but rather to reveal what is hidden so that our sin no longer has power over us. Whether we like to admit it or not, our darkest secrets can wield enormous power over us and prevent us from living our fullest life, the life that God desires for us to live. As I repeatedly have said before, Jesus came so that we

may have life and live it the full, as Jesus tells his disciples later in John's Gospel: "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." (John 10:10)

There is hope for us. In fact, there is more than hope for us — there is life! Recall what I shared with you in my Ash Wednesday sermon, that God is full of compassion and mercy. As I shared that day, the word for mercy comes from the Latin word *miser cordia*, a combination of the English words pity and heart. It is from God's very heart that God has compassion for us, even when we have turned away from the life God promises us. Our God is a God who loves us beyond our imagination, a God who took upon himself the cross and suffered for our redemption.

The service of Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer* captures well the inestimable love and mercy of God when, after making our confession, the priest reminds us of the comfortable words. I think it is helpful for us to hear them again and so I share that portion of the liturgy in full here:

Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.

"Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." (Matthew 11:28)

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

Hear also what Saint Paul saith.

"This is a true saying, and worthy of all to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (1 Timothy 1:15)

Hear also what Saint John saith.

If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 2:1-2)

It is striking that before we are invited to the Eucharistic Table to be fed, we are reminded of the wondrous love of God for us. As Saint Paul reminds us in

his Epistle to the Romans, “nothing can separate us from the love of God.” (Romans 8:39) It is from God’s very heart that God yearns for us to be one with him and to feed us with his very body.

My friends, as we continue to make a Lenten journey to the celebration fo the Paschal Mystery, the Easter feast, I invite you to take some time this week and examine your life. Invite Christ, the great physician, to heal you from all that binds you from living the life God promises you. And let your hearts be free, knowing that our God is full of compassion and mercy and loves us more than we can ever comprehend. Amen.