

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

The **mystery of conversion**, the transforming of a person from dead to alive, is a great and awesome event. As sinners, we tend to minimize the importance of this. It's almost as if we think of ourselves as infinitely loveable, completely worthy, even desirable to our Creator. We think, "Who wouldn't want to invite me into their house?" But the reality is desperately dark and a bit frightening. C.F. W. Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod writes:

*By nature, a person is incapable of being a dwelling place for the Holy Ghost. Each of us lies in a deep sleep of security from which we must be awakened. By nature, we are **completely unconcerned** about salvation. Even if we recognize that we are great, lost sinners (and this is the exception rather than the rule), we do not regard **our sins** as something frightening or we retain a greater concern for earthly comfort and bodily well being than heavenly comfort and spiritual joy for our soul. Whoever remains in this condition keeps his heart shut to the Holy Ghost and He is unable to enter it. Such a person cannot be saved.* ⁽¹⁾

So the **frightening part** for all of us is the reality that God could have easily passed on saving us. We did nothing to garner His loving affection – no matter how sweet and loveable we think we were. Spiritually dead, our hearts were like a sealed tomb (Ephesians 2:1-3). It's like a great rock had been rolled over our hearts, and nothing on this earth could remove this hard, immovable object.

But something other-worldly was present: the **Holy Ghost**. For most of us, we had a sponsor (or two) who brought us to the Word of God. This tremendous gift of access to the Ghost, through the Word, cannot be overstated. Only the Holy Ghost could roll away the hardened cover that sealed our hearts, and bring us to faith in Jesus Christ. For some of us, this happened at a very young age – the water and the Word washed us clean, not by the removal of dirt, but by the inward washing of the Ghost, who has freed us from the guilt and shame of our sin (1 Peter 3:21). For others, this happened later in life, as we came to the Word, not joyfully or willfully, but kicking and screaming. **But the Word worked as God has promised it would**, and the Holy Ghost changed us in an instant. I truly enjoy talking with people about how this event changed their lives. There's the miserable soul who hated the world and his own life, who was transformed in an instant – who could do nothing but smile, and thank God. There's the man who was an alcoholic, who upon conversion, has remained sober every day for the last 32 years. While, as Lutherans, we don't dwell on the event (in fact, those who came to faith as infants or small children only know their life in Christ), we do give thanks for the miracle of conversion – for without it, we would most certainly be dead in our trespasses.

No matter when or where your conversion event took place, you can be assured of this: **God was at work through His Word and His Spirit, to bring you into His eternal kingdom**. And you had no part to play in it happening to you (Col. 1:13-14). In an instant, you became the dwelling place of God. Your body became His holy temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17). The Holy Ghost's gift to you of faith in Christ provides forgiveness of sins, and where this is forgiveness, there is life and salvation (Luther's Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar).

Now, part of the **serious nature of sin** (and our lack of recognizing it as serious) is the callousness of our treatment of this new life. I think it goes back to the idea that we are somehow worthy of this new life. That through the school of hard knocks, through the difficult trials of life, we've **earned** our spot in heaven. Nothing could be further from the truth. We've actually deserve eternal separation from God.

It's in the callous and even reckless nature that I see people **playing with the gift of salvation**

like it's a trifle, an insignificant thing. They come to worship and mouth the words of Confession, like it doesn't apply to them. They go through the motions of receiving the Lord's very body and blood, imagining that the person next to them really needs it badly. Ultimately, this shows up in the nature of God calling us to **daily repentance**. The Holy Ghost calls us to a recognition of our sin, through the reminder of God's word (His Law). With the Ghost's help, we confess our sin and seek God's strength to turn from it in the future. We're reminded of Jesus' death on the cross – WITH THAT VERY SIN – and how it has been removed from us, and placed on Him. Through faith in Christ's shed blood, we indeed have been separated from the sin that will one day lead to our physical demise. This is a daily, sometimes hourly event in our sinful lives as Christians.

But how long does it take, after we removed ourselves from God's Word and Sacrament (by removing ourselves from worship and Bible study), before **the call to repentance by the Holy Ghost is ignored**? How long does it take for us to lose sight of the awesome wonder and great significance of our conversion event? Do we honestly think that it's a gift that can't be lost? Has Satan so twisted your thinking that you can imagine yourself as independently good, and clean, and that the pathway to heaven is a wide road that you can journey along without help from above?

This year, Pentecost Sunday is celebrated on June 8th. It's the wonderful birthday of Christ's Church on earth. For it was on this day, nearly two thousand years ago, that God sent His Spirit, the Holy Ghost, upon this earth, in a new and great expression of His love for us. Baptism becomes our very entrance into His kingdom, as the Holy Ghost comes to indwell – to set up His temple – in us. In a very real way, **it's your birthday party as well**, since you came to life in Christ, because He sent this Gift upon the world. He wanted you to have this Gift. He did all the work of opening your heart and mind, so that this precious Gift could be yours.

Now, we have choices to make in this new life. Do we **nourish this spiritual Gift** by daily feeding on God's holy word? Do we weekly make worship our number one priority (that means attending even when we have guests or relatives staying with us this summer)? Do we recognize our conversion event (Baptism) – and the nourishing and care of our spiritual life in Christ - as more than just a good thing – but the difference between heaven, and eternal separation from God (hell)? We have a God that did not bring us to faith, only to abandon us to our own devices and senses. No, **He purposely gave us His Church as a safe haven for weary souls**. We have a place that provides the visible promise of forgiveness of sins (Baptism and the Lord's Supper), the Law that keeps us from becoming over-confident in our own goodness, and the Gospel that reminds us of God's great grace and mercy – delivered to us through His Only Son. In short, we have God's protection until we see Him face-to-face. What choices will you make this summer? May God always guard and guide your way. Have a blessed summer.

Pastor Travis

(1) Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther, *God Grant It*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, p. 455, c. 2006.