

“Conversion – and the Fullness of Time” by John Morris

October 9, 2016



Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

We're approaching Recommitment Sunday. I will certainly be recommitting to Seekers. Marjory talked in her sermon last Sunday about how, for her and Peter, Seekers is like a biological family, in one important respect: as she ages, she hopes and prays that we Seekers will take care of her. That's how I feel too. I have no biological family left, and of course no children, though thanks to Katie, I've inherited a very nice group of her family. But when I think of being old, and depending on others for help, it's Seekers I'm picturing.

So this moment in our liturgical year doesn't have a lot of drama for me. I'm one of you, and I'm not going anywhere. But I've been thinking about recommitment in general – recommitment to what it means to be a Christian. How did I get here?

This started back in the spring, when I realized that, come August, it would be the 30-year anniversary of my conversion. Wow, even saying that, “my conversion” – I feel like a dork, like I'm using a term that

has either been debased and cheapened, or has no meaning at all. But let me quote our text from Timothy today: We “are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.” I don’t want you to be ruined. So I’ll just call it a conversion, and in a few minutes I’ll say more about it.

This year, as I say, is the 30th anniversary of that experience, and it really got me thinking about how things last, and what matters. You can’t know, when something happens, what its significance will be. A small turn of events, like meeting a stranger you wind up marrying, could have a lasting impact. Or, in the other direction, a great big huge Experience with a capital E might lose its value, and turn into one of those episodes you’re embarrassed to even talk about, because you remember what a big deal you made of it at the time.

I was worried that my conversion would turn out to be like that. I know just about all of my friends were *sure* it would. One friend said, kindly but skeptically, “Well, I’ll be curious to know how you look back on all this in ten years.” That was a fair question – more than fair. Only time can show us what really matters.

I guess I’d better say a little about what happened to me that August night 30 years ago. And it really will be “a little” – I’ve never told my spiritual autobiography to Seekers, and this is not the occasion for it. I’ll just say enough to explain why it changed my life, and why, so many years later, it means so much to me still.

In August 1986 I’d been sober in AA for almost five years, and had worked the 12 Steps, but without much understanding of the spiritual dimensions of the program. I was an agnostic, leaning toward atheist, although I’d had several powerful and inexplicable semi-mystical experiences during my life. That summer my life began to fall apart (again, I’m keeping this short, and the details don’t really matter anyway).

Finally, one night I went to visit a guy named Lou who I knew from AA. Lou was a Catholic priest, but I wasn’t looking for priestly counsel, I just liked him and wanted to hang out with him. We sat on the porch of his rectory and I poured out all my troubles (which I’m sure he’d

already heard a number of times in AA meetings). When I was done, he said, "Well, I don't really know what more I can say to you, though since I am a priest, I'd be glad to pray with you if you like." I said sure, feeling like What've I got to lose. He put his hand on my head and began to pray.

I can't remember the words, because something happened. It was like a bolt of lightning that started at the top of my head and went all the way down my spine. The starry night seemed immense. I began to cry. When Lou stopped praying I said, "What did you do to me?" He looked alarmed, and asked me what happened. I was unable to explain, but I think I said something about feeling God's presence. Lou became businesslike. "OK, we have to baptize you," he said, and got the chrism and the holy water and, boom, I was a Christian.

Well, not quite that fast. For about two weeks afterwards I was living on a different plane. I know how pompous or pious or just silly that sounds, but I don't know how else to say it. I had a heightened awareness of God and love everywhere I looked. My own problems became insignificant. My heart opened. God showed me how to pray. The world was transformed. I hate to make this comparison, but it was what I thought at the time: it was like being high on some great psychedelic drug that never let you down. Slowly it faded, but very slowly.

I had a therapist I trusted a lot, and I went to him in the middle of this and said, basically, OK, am I having a nervous breakdown? Because that's what a lot of my friends think. Talk about the grace of God: whatever this man replied would carry incredible weight with me. And what he said was, Absolutely not. What you're describing is what people have described for thousands of years. You had a sudden experience of God's reality. In the East they call it "opening the third eye." In the West it's generally called "conversion," or a "road to Damascus" experience. But it sounds very real, and *you* don't sound the least bit mentally ill.

That was a big relief.

I still wasn't a Christian, mind you. I did not experience Jesus in any of this. Crossing that bridge was a little more left-brain: I thought about how Lou was a priest, and how so many of the people I respected and

admired in AA were Christians, and how I'd had a previous kinda sorta mystical experience in college with a woman who was a Christian, and I decided . . . well, let's just be a Christian. Besides, I was baptized, wasn't I? So I went back to Lou (who, by the way, was totally worried about me, because he'd never had anything like this happen before on his watch, so to speak). Lou sent me to a nun named Rea McDonnell for spiritual direction.

Let me end this story-telling part of my sermon. The initial "high" that I've described did finally abate. I continued to be a sinner, just as I am today. I of course harbored doubts in my mind about what had happened. But my heart never doubted, not once, not ever since. Thanks to Rea's loving counsel, I became a Christian, a Catholic. For reasons that are far from the point of this sermon, the Catholic Church in the end didn't feel like a home for me, and I found Seekers. And now, 30 years later, I find myself looking back at that August night and pondering what it meant.

Let me return to what I said at the beginning of this sermon: Our lives are lived in time. We can't know the meaning of what happens to us until we see how the story plays out. What matters, what lasts, what shapes us deeply – in the moment, we can only guess, or hope. The truth will be revealed in the fullness of time.

So, 30 years ago, I could only hope. My conversion seemed real, it felt real. And I soon learned that it required, yes, recommitment. It wasn't enough to look inside myself periodically and affirm that I still felt God's presence. There was work to do in the world, steps that had to be walked. This became particularly clear as I committed myself to following Christ. Being a Christian, at least as I understand it, asks a lot of us. Do I "feel God's presence"? Great, that's more grace than many receive. But now I have to go do something about it. I have to live like I mean it.

Here are two hard things about living a Christian life. First, I need a community. I'm sure it's possible, if circumstances require it, to remain faithful in isolation, but that was not Jesus' way, and it's never been my way either. Marjory's current School of Christian Living class on community is reminding me of how important it is for me to recommit to community, all the time. That's hard. Often, I'd rather stick with my sense of my own specialness and rightness, and draw clear judgmental lines in the

dirt when it comes to what I'll tolerate from others. Imagine a community where everyone was doing that. It sounds like hell.

Another hard thing about being a Christian is living in fear and trembling. Shortly after my conversion, when I was learning about Christianity, I started to get anxious. In order to follow Christ and love God, did I have to accept the culture of right-wing American Christianity? Did I have to praise God for saving some and damning others, and have a snappy pat answer for all the suffering in the world, and generally act as if there were no more questions, no more heartache, no more dread and awe in simply being alive? With some wise counsel from others, I firmly rejected this pious nonsense. There's no detour around suffering, and if your eyes and ears are open, you will be afraid, and you will tremble. That's hard enough, but what I find even harder is choosing, over and over, to stay in that place. I have a good brain, and so I constantly come up with clever answers to the mysteries of life. Boy do I want to believe them! But every answer is wrong, and every day I have to look toward God and say, I don't know, I need help, please, thank you!

I can't say I feel satisfied with the Christian I am. I have so much to learn, and so far to go in really living out my beliefs. But one thing I do feel sure of: My hopes for that conversion experience have been realized. I wanted it be the turning point in my life – and it was. I wanted nothing to be same again – and nothing has been. I wanted to be able to speak with authority about it to others – and now I can. If this thing wasn't real, then nothing is.

This summer I decided to seek out Father Lou and Sister Rea, both of whom I'd lost touch with many years ago. I wanted to thank them, and I wanted to let them know that my conversion was indeed real and life-changing. (I wish I could say that I was obeying Christ's injunction in our Gospel reading today, "Go show yourself to the priest" – but I didn't think of it.) Lou barely remembered me, after a lifetime of ministry, but as we talked it seemed to come back to him. "Oh yes," he nodded, "you came to visit me that night and said, 'Lou, say whatever you want but I just don't want to hear any of that God shit.'" Oops. Sister Rea not only remembered me but, as many of you know, came with me to Seekers the very next Sunday. I was a little worried that she'd be disappointed I was no longer a Catholic,

but she loved Seekers and seemed totally happy for me. In fact, judging from some of her comments about the Catholic Church, I think she envies us a little.

I know a few spiritual people who've also had a "road to Damascus" experience, and I know many more who have not. As far as I can tell, there's not much difference among us, in terms of spiritual growth or commitment to God. We've all had to put in the hard work, to recommit constantly to what's important. Worshipping is a human capacity and a human need. As David Foster Wallace wrote, "Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." And I think we make that choice over and over. The thing that happened to me, that change of heart, was permanent, or so I hope. But just like anyone else, I get sidetracked and confused. I start to worship the wrong things, usually because they resemble parts of myself. Recommitment means remembering what matters, what's important.

Amen.

That's the conclusion of my sermon. However, I would like to say one more thing. You may have noticed that the Prelude music was Aretha Franklin's "Respect," which I'm sure is on the minds of a lot of American women this morning. So to continue that theme, I'd like to dedicate the Offertory song ["Long Walk to D.C."] to Hillary Clinton. Thank you.