

Last Sunday I began an Advent Preaching series on conversion. We looked at Romans 13:8-14 and saw the context for conversion is the Church in which we learn to grow in love, and the means of conversion is putting on Christ: actively living in and for Jesus.

Today we see the Mission and the Fruit of Conversion. Our mission is clear; Paul writes: *“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant of the circumcised, on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy”* (vs. 15:8, 9a). Paul writes emphatically, *“Welcome one another...”*. When we practice hospitality, we widen the boundaries of our lives to make a safe place for others. We see others, not as threats, intrusions, or burdens but as blessings, gifts from God through whom we will know more of God’s blessing and presence. This is the heart of all Church Growth. We must open more than our doors. Christian hospitality makes a safe place for the stranger; true welcome is expectant and grateful; hospitable Christians overtly treasure everyone; a welcoming faith community is intent and intentional on surrounding others and one another with Christ’s peace and grace.

This is possible because, as Paul reminds us, *“...Christ has welcomed you...Christ has become (your) servant...”*. In truth, we are all guests; we are all invited into Christ’s Body. I have lived all my life in the Christian Church; Church has always been my home. Yet I have no more claim on Christ’s Body than someone who has never been in a Church. We have all been invited; we have all been welcomed; this is Christ’s Church, the Lord’s House, and we are all visitors.

God’s invitation in Jesus is universal and eternal. Paul writes, Jesus welcomed us, became a servant to confirm the former promises *“...in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”* Here we see the full mission of conversion. In Paul’s day, the term Gentile meant more than ‘not Jewish’. “Gentile” were those without salvation, without the possibility of salvation. The New Testament witnesses that these are the very people Jesus came to welcome into the Kingdom. Jesus revealed that while human beings might reject God, God yearns and calls all creation to return. This invitation is boundless. Conversion is the Church’s witness and mission to the world: calling all people—no one is neglectable, disqualified, or disposable—to invite everyone into Christ. We live this mission of conversion by following the example of our Lord: welcoming all, serving all for the glory of God.

Paul also reminds us today of the fruit of conversion; that is, as we are converted something grows. The fruit of conversion is hope. Paul concludes: *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”* (v 13). There are two kinds of hope. One is hope for something in doubt, as when Paul states he is hoping to visit a congregation soon. The other kind is expressed in the Bible much more often. This is hope anxious for what is sure to happen. As the Prayer Book Catechism teaches: *“The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world.”* (p 861). The more we are converted into Christ the more we confidently hope in Christ. This fruit of conversion is always important for Christians and Churches, especially in times of stress and anxiety. Hope-filled faith does not give up on the Body of Christ, despite affliction. Christian hope trusts Christ in all things. Christian hope is faithful to the Body of Christ, even and especially when others appear faith-less. As the Holy Spirit fills us with Christian hope there is little room left for despair, party-spirit, or wistful nostalgia. The hope-filled Christian knows that Jesus Christ can and will bring blessing, even out of the awful-est messes human beings can engineer. Jesus Christ is Lord; what have we to fear?

The mission of conversion is welcoming restoration in Christ for all; the fruit of conversion is hope. Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever.. Amen.