

Sermon Notes – May 13, 2018
“Making a Christian”
Brian Walton

The beeper went off and Carol Stein looked down at the numbers. It was a call from the Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit of the Los Angeles Hospital where she was training as a Chaplain. She learned from the call that twins had been born that evening - one robust and already in the nursery, the other clinging tenaciously to life in the Neo-natal intensive care unit. The anxious and confused parents had requested that this little boy be baptized immediately. As the night chaplain, Carol was the only one to go. She continues the story in her own words:

“I arrived at the unit before the parents. I explained to the nursing staff, ‘We are about to baptize this baby and since I am a rabbi, I need help from a Christian. Are there any Christians here?’ The room fell strangely silent. I turned to one nurse: ‘Are you a Christian?’ ‘No, sorry.’

‘I guess I can help if no one else does,’ a nurse says from the other end of the room. ‘You’re a Christian,’ I inquire. ‘I don’t go to church very often, but I was baptized. I guess I’m a Christian.’ Just then the father arrived, the mother unable to make the trip to the ward. I explained to him that I am Jewish, but that I have recruited a Christian to aid in the baptism. The room grows quiet as we gather around the baby boy fragile and pale in his basinet. I begin: “Gracious God, we ask you to look with love on this child, on his family, on his caregivers, and on all present. Grant them strength in the midst of fear and through baptism welcome this child into the life of faith.’ I hand a prepared card with the liturgy of baptism to the

nurse who volunteered earlier. I ask the father the name of the child. It is Luke. The nurse begins, 'In the name of the Christian community I sign Luke with a cross on his forehead and with water I baptize him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...' When the nurse is finished I invite all who desire to take some water and make the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead. The father dips his finger into the water and gently puts a cross on his son's forehead.

When he is finished the father hands the small bottle of water back to me. I tighten the cap on the bottle and give it back to him. "Why don't you take it home with you. It has become very special water. You made a Christian with it.'

The chaplain concludes: "As I am leaving the ward I overhear the nurse - the one who participated in the baptism, the one who didn't go to church very often – say to her colleague with holy bewilderment, 'We made a Christian tonight.'"

The Ethiopian Eunuch in this morning's scripture is an interesting character. In all likelihood he is a tall and proud African man who at some point in his life forsook his sexuality (castrated to be exact) in order to devote himself to his work as an aid to the Queen of Ethiopia. Yet in today's story we suspect that he has become disillusioned with his life. He has made his way to the land of the Jews and is found reading their scriptures. As he travels on the road back to his homeland he meets Phillip, one of the leaders of the early church. Phillip asks the Ethiopian what he is reading and the man reveals that he is reading the Hebrew prophet Isaiah and that the story doesn't isn't making much sense. Phillip

offers to explain and the Ethiopian welcomes him into his carriage. Phillip explains his understanding that Christ was the suffering servant that Isaiah wrote about and he goes on to tell the Ethiopian everything about Jesus – his life and teachings, his death and resurrection.

The Ethiopian is converted by Phillip's passionate witness and asks if he can be "made a Christian". The carriage stops near a pond and Phillip invites the Ethiopian down into the water, immersing his whole body and baptizing him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This morning we are making three Christians. Little Scarlett Grieve does not know much about what happened this morning but her parents have promised to surround her with God's love and some day she will have to decide for herself if she wants to claim the title of 'Christian'. That is, in fact, what Andrew Pittman and Bridget Salaman, have done today. Despite their busy lives of school assignments, music festivals and debating clubs, and despite the distractions of social media and hanging out with friends, they have chosen to confirm the vows made by their parents at the time of their baptism. They have chosen of their own free will to align themselves with the way of Christ in the world. We must not assume, however, that the making of a Christian is complete at the time of confirmation. My guess is that for the three recognized this morning Christian-making began some generations earlier when Verna and Hixon, and Maureen and Ellis and Dick and Ginny, and likely others whom I do not know, started on their own Christian path. It became a family affair and the life and attitudes that shape a Christian were passed from one generation to another. Perhaps it

is more likely that the offspring of Christians follow in their families' footsteps; yet; it is not a guarantee. I lament that my own children are not confirmed and have not chosen baptism for my grandchildren. I lament, but I do not worry, for I recognize that the God of Love is active in my children's lives. Every time I see them hug their kids; or help out a neighbour; or support the needy; or confront racism and homophobia I know that the God of Love is active in their life. Choosing to walk the Christian path in a church community is not the only way to live out God's call - ask any devout Muslim or Buddhist or humanitarian – still, walking the Christian path in a church community is one way to be shaped, supported and nurtured by God.

There was a time when the process from baptism through Sunday school to confirmation and a lifetime in the church was a given. Not so much anymore. You may be familiar with the little poem about friendship in which the author states that friends come into our lives for a reason (to help us through a rough patch); or a season (while we live in a particular neighbourhood or belong to a particular team); or for a lifetime (those who journey with us through the ups and downs, the successes and failures). The author encourages us to accept this diversity of friendship without judgment – each kind of friend being important in their own way.

In the 21st century, I've come to think of the Christian journey in that way. I've met people who become enthused about the story of Jesus and turn to the church in a time of crisis. They need God's help for a reason and hopefully the church can be a conduit of God's love in such a time. Others seem to come for a season – perhaps when their children are small

and they want to introduce them to a life of faith or, until, life pulls them in a different direction ... to the lake, or to Sunday morning yoga. Still others engage the Christian faith for a lifetime. I guess I'm one of them. I met God when I was but a child, frightened and walking through a church yard, God's love grew in me as I attended church and, later, seminary and - try as it might - this secular society with all of its doubts and temptations has simply not been able to shake the Christianity out of me. Like many of you, it seems I am here for a lifetime. I have given up trying to explain why it is different for different folks; I've recognized that people must sort out their own relationship with God and whatever part the church and I can play in it, is a blessing.

There is an ancient tradition that suggests Phillip would not let the Ethiopian leave the water from the same side that he entered it. Phillip insisted that in becoming a Christian one couldn't go back to the way things were. I guess that's why a Christian is never completely made, never finished. The call of Jesus is the call to transformation and if you've truly experienced that call you will know that you are always growing.

Richard Rhor, a contemporary writer imagines what could happen if our Christianity really matured, really transformed us, really stuck. He muses – 'I am interested to see Christians form intentional communities ... to create volunteer corps where young people would be supported to work at peace and justice-making for a year or two; where parish members would purchase homes and live in neighbourhoods where there is greatest need; where the aged, the differently abled and those on the margins would be welcome, where life is sustained by prayer and love, a place where

radical love is in the air.’

We are not there – we are still in the process of being made in the image of Christ. For today we want to welcome Andrew and Bridget and Scarlett to the journey. We pray that we might be good companions for them. Amen.