

“What Must I Do to Be Saved?”

Acts 16:16-34

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This month, *The New Yorker* magazine is celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a double issue. In it is an article that just struck me to the core. Written by one of the magazine’s premier writers, it was entitled “SISTERHOOD: A Remarkable Alliance Between an Order of Catholic Nuns and the Women on Texas’s Death Row.” The members of a cloistered Catholic order were given access to the female unit at Gatesville Prison in Gatesville, Texas where a number of women are currently awaiting execution. These prisoners have committed heinous crimes for which, without a stay from the governor, will pay the ultimate price with their OWN lives. The article contained a number of in-depth interviews with women on death row who openly and honestly shared their personal stories: their drug-filled pasts involving all sorts of physical and sexual abuse and neglect, the crimes for which they were convicted, and their present life on death row. Unsurprisingly, many had resorted to prostitution just to survive.

What made their accounts so compelling was how radically their lives changed once they met these nuns. Many of them experienced unconditional love and acceptance for the first time which not only enabled them to at last forgive themselves and accept responsibility for their crimes, but to discover they could also LOVE AND BE LOVED in return. A case in point was Melissa—on death row sixteen years now—who revealed that although she’d grown up Catholic, it wasn’t until she developed a bond with these nuns who had helped her to find God and feel real hope once again. She said, “I get peace from them. I’m a new creation today. I’m not the same woman that I used to be.”

The nuns themselves admitted that when they first entered the prison, they were afraid of not knowing what to expect meeting these women. Yet, they soon discovered that instead of being the ones ministering to a group of the MOST HARDENED of offenders, they had actually been ministered to BY THEM. They try not to think about the crimes that led the inmates to death row. Said Sister Mary Thomas, “I don’t try to understand why they did it, or who did what. God sent us here to love them as they are—those who are repentant, those who are not, those who are in denial, those who are innocent. We just look at who they are now.” The experience caused them to wonder what if those prisoners had been given OTHER opportunities in life- had THEY grown up in families filled with love and protection and education, might they have turned out DIFFERENTLY? But then they had to ask THEMSELVES, “What would WE be had WE been the ones born addicted- with parents who exposed US to drugs and other illegal activities while constantly being physically and sexually abused”

It’s not just their RELATIONSHIP with the nuns that was so poignant but the LOVE and FELLOWSHIP these prisoners have engendered AMONGST THEMSELVES. They’ve developed a SISTERHOOD whereby they are totally open and honest with one another, learning lessons in forgiveness and acceptance they’d never KNOWN before. As they saw it, death row had dramatically been transformed into a church with Christ as its cornerstone. For example, with Melissa’s execution date scheduled less than a month away, the sisters and her inmate family threw a special dinner for her. Some couldn’t help seeing a parallel between the fate of the women and that of Jesus, who was HIMSELF arrested, condemned, and executed. This was

effectively her Last Supper, and the nuns wondered whether they would ever see her again. One of the sisters brought out a guitar and together, the nuns serenaded the prisoners with liturgical songs. After the party, they held a Communion service with each one receiving a special blessing from the sacrament's officiant. Melissa responded by telling everyone, "I just want to thank y'all for your love and kindness. You've been so good to me. It has been hard, but your love and goodness give me so much strength."

What these nuns have helped them to see was that experiencing the love of Christ through the uncritical and unconditional love and acceptance they've been shown by the sisters, these women prisoners don't feel WORTHLESS AND ALONE any longer. They've now become altogether new and are now no longer the same people whose pasts were once so violent and dark. Brittany, ANOTHER inmate who was born addicted to heroin from a heroin-addicted mother and for years was sexually abused by her stepfather, confessed that while growing up, she was convinced the only place she would ever end up in was hell. She said, "By the time everything happened that brought me here, I was so completely broken I felt no hope. I spent my first ten years here trying to understand the purpose of my life." Now, knowing the support she receives from the others, she has grown strong and confident, exemplifying the change that the nuns promised Jesus could perform in their lives- "metanoia" or the complete personal transformation that can be brought about through repentance.

Recently, the warden allowed them out of their tiny cells to create a small garden together in which they now grow tomatoes, onions, collards, mustard greens, beets, carrots, peppers, beans and cantaloupes along with some herbs and flowers- all of which go to serve the prison population. Brittany expressed how it represented so much MORE than clumps of brown dry earth but it had become her "promised land." She said, "In so many profound and beautiful ways this is what the Lord has shown me...In it I see the ways he took MY brokenness and nurtured it into something able to bear fruit and bring joy... Places my heart had been hardened by things of this world, he dug deep until those places broken apart and began to sift through his hands. He then planted seeds that broke open and took root deep within my heart."

The elements of this morning's drama ALSO include prison and an abused woman. We are told that during a missionary journey to Philippi in Asia Minor, the Apostle Paul and his colleague Silas were beaten and then thrown into prison for delivering a young slave-girl from demonic possession. It was not the exorcism itself that got them into trouble but that this girl had the power of divinization or telling the future and her master had made a fortune from off her miraculous power- like a modern-day pimp, she had become his personal meal ticket. However, once she was HEALED, her power disappeared and her owner was now left without a valuable source of income. Others, fearing that their OWN economic security might be affected next, went to the authorities where they falsely claimed that the two were rabble-rousers who were breaking Roman law. Paul and Silas were subsequently arrested, beaten, and then thrown into the stocks in the deepest, darkest part of the prison- its innermost dungeon. The curious thing is that for all the unfairness of their situation, the two of them don't condemn their accusers or curse the whole judicial proceeding, they don't mourn the misfortune of their fate or shake their fists at God for the seeming injustice of it all. Rather, they settle into their circumstances and spend their time singing psalms and praising God for all his goodness.

As it got close to midnight--the darkest part of the night--they were praying and singing when a great earthquake struck. The quake was SO severe that the very foundations of the

prison were shaken, all the doors opened, and everyone's chains became unfastened. During my twelve years in California, I personally experienced several such earthquakes and there isn't a more powerless feeling one can have; there's absolutely no place to hide or escape from the possibility of being entombed or crushed by falling materials or debris. One time, I was fifteen feet up a ladder putting insulation batts into a cathedral ceiling when suddenly the entire house started to shake violently. The ladder began bouncing across the floor and I was so sure that we were going to come crashing down in what might have resulted in real injury. All I could do was hold on to it for dear life until the tremors subsided.

Apparently, much weariness had overtaken the jailer and he had fallen asleep. Now, with all the shaking going on, he was suddenly stirred from his dreams. Once he realizes that the doors to each of the cells were now open, he naturally assumed that everyone had fled to freedom. Knowing full well that the penalty for such dereliction of duty was DEATH, he drew his sword from its sheaf with the intention of taking his own life. But St. Paul, perceiving what was about to happen, suddenly cried out, "Do not harm yourself for we are all here!" Calling his servants to bring some lights, he discovered to his surprise that everyone was STILL in his cell, that none of his prisoners had escaped. The jailer was by now SO grateful that he fell down before the two missionaries and asked, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" They reply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." He immediately took them to his own home, cleansed their wounds, and then fed them. Afterwards, he and the whole of his family were baptized into the faith, causing them to REJOICE in the Lord.

It's unfortunate that we in the mainline churches have abandoned such historic Christian tenets as "salvation" and "conversion" and becoming "born again," leaving them to the fundamentalists of the church. The idea of "conversion" is not a complicated thing. It suggests the act of "turning around," of moving out of one place and into another- a process that can be physical, spiritual, emotional, theological, or moral. The word doesn't appear all too often in the Bible but when it DOES, it implies such words as "repentance," "regeneration," and "being born again." To be converted is to make a U-turn, to start at square one again, to go back to the drawing board. There is a Greek word meaning "change of mind" but TRUE conversion involves MUCH MORE than that- it involves a change of direction, a change of heart and of will. Judas, following his betrayal of Christ suffered a "change of mind"- then went out and hung himself. PETER, on the other hand, experienced TRUE conversion- a "change of heart," then went out and REPENTED!

In the New Testament, conversion, repentance, and new life are directly related to the person and message of Jesus Christ. Jesus began his public ministry by announcing that "the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." In his final words to his disciples, he commissioned them "to go, therefore, and make disciples on all nations." Such conversion is expressed a number of ways: moving from darkness into light, a spiritual rebirth or being born again, a restoration from impurity, the translation from death to life, a turning away from Satan to God, becoming a totally new creation, getting rid of the old and acquiring a new humanity, a dying to self but rising again in Christ.

Of course, the CLASSIC conversion story, is the conversion of ST. PAUL when as Saul of Tarsus--a zealous Pharisee--he was on his way to Damascus to throw Christians in that city into prison. Instead, while en route, he received a vision of Christ which left him blind, a symbol of his spiritual blindness. Following that experience, he was never again the same. Subsequently, he took

his place alongside the REST of the church and, as we see in this account, he experienced for himself the SAME persecution he once meted out to OTHER Christians.

But if conversion is a change of direction, a change in our character and attitude and values, it ALSO an ACT OF SURRENDER. Conversion is never something WE do- never in the Bible do we read that a person “converted” ONESELF or SOMEBODY ELSE. Rather, it is always something done TO us. We “WERE converted” and as a result, our response to God became an act of submission. The story is always the same- that it was GOD who took the initiative and all WE could do was respond TO it. God came in search of us and we responded in the only way we could- by opening ourselves up to him. Rather than FIGHTING God, we learned to TRUST him as a power that was greater than ourselves and at the same time had our best interests at heart.

Of course, you’re probably thinking to yourself, “Dave, why are you talking to us this morning about “CONVERSION” of all topics? After all, we’re the CHURCH; we’re ALREADY converted, AREN’T WE? Each of us is comfortably seated in our favorite pew with our names clearly inscribed on the church’s rolls. We occasionally attend a Bible study or two, serve on committees, or help on clean-up days when asked, and of course we try to give generously when the collection plate is passed around on Sunday mornings. Isn’t THAT proof that we’ve been converted? Shouldn’t you be addressing people OUTSIDE the church with this kind of message? Aren’t you “preaching to the choir” with this sermon of yours?

ACTUALLY NO, because conversion is never a “one-time event” but rather a CONSTANT, ON-GOING PROCESS that never stops refining our character, that constantly shapes our attitudes, our values, and our lifestyle. When St. Paul instructs the Christians in Rome, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” his words LITERALLY translated state, “be ye BEING transformed” by the renewing of your mind. In other words, conversion is a CONTINUOUS ACTIVITY that takes place EVERY DAY, from ONE MOMENT TO THE NEXT. The activity of God in us is never static but ever at work, ever dynamic. DAILY, we are molded and formed more and more into the image of his Son by his Holy Spirit. DAILY we learn new lessons about the need for forgiveness, even as we learn how God has forgiven us. DAILY we discover new depths to the word "love" even as God has demonstrated his own perfect love towards us. The conversion process never ends.

And as conversion is a CONSTANT process in our lives, it is also a COMPREHENSIVE process. Conversion needs to take place, not just in our spiritual lives but on EVERY DIMENSION OF OUR LIVES- in our SOCIAL ATTITUDES, as the Holy Spirit enlarges our sympathies for persons who are weaker and less fortunate than ourselves; in our VALUES, as they become broader, more inclusive, rather than bigoted and selfish; and in our FINANCES, that we might hoard less and less of it as we discover more and more how little security money actually provides us. Conversion must take place on ALL levels that our commitment to Christ might be reflected in the way we think, the way we work, the manner in which we spend money, even the persons and issues we support and vote for- and that is a process that will continue right up until the day we die.

Isn’t this what conversion is all about, that like those women I described at the beginning of my sermon, we were all BLIND OURSELVES to our own true condition and DEAF to the voice of God? But then we discovered a whole NEW world, a whole NEW reality out there just waiting for us to enter which when glimpsed, we never wanted to return to the old! God was out there desperately pleading with each one of us, appealing to our heart and our conscience, trying to let us know who he is and how much he desired for us to experience a relationship filled with his peace

and his love. Then, despite having been reared in the church or years of pew-sitting, there came a time when we experienced an “aha!” moment, an instant of self-discovery. We realized there REALLY WAS someone there, someone who IN SPITE OF who we were or what we had done, accepted us WHOLEHEARTEDLY and UNRESERVEDLY with Jesus serving as PROOF.

This realization was more than just intellectual or theological but one that involved a self-assessment of the most profound kind- the admission of just how proud and selfish and self-destructive we were. What was needed and desired above ALL ELSE was a “turning around,” an opportunity for a “new beginning,” a chance to start all over again with a fresh clean slate that could ONLY come from OUTSIDE us- in other words, we were overcome by a need for God’s grace. How and when such moments occur remain a great mystery and yet we knew it could not originate from within ourselves but only with GOD. We knew that life had to consist of SO MUCH MORE than the striving for personal success and material possessions, that ideals such as love and humility and the pursuit of a more just world HAD to play a significant part of it. Therefore, we humbly bowed our heads and asked God to forgive us. We implored him not to give up on us but to remain patient with us, allowing us to see and learn more about that new reality, that new kingdom of his.

The question we need to ask OURSELVES this morning is THIS- is the conversion process CONTINUING in our lives and in this special community we call “the church?” Are we MATURING in our Christian walk? Do we see the work that God has begun in our lives as an ONGOING ACTIVITY, not just in the renewing of our minds but in the TRANSFORMATION OF OUR CHARACTER, in our ATTITUDES, our VALUES, and our LIFESTYLE? Has the “LIVING WORD” of Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit awakened our soul and given it LIGHT and HOPE and JOY; in other words, have WE been SET FREE!

Friends, it’s possible to wander at liberty the outside world, to go anywhere you want without the restraints of iron shackles and steel bars staring you in the face or the constant scrutiny of armed guards and yet STILL REMAIN a prisoner- a prisoner to our CONSCIENCE, a prisoner to our LUSTS and WORST IMPULSES, a prisoner to FAILURES AND PAST MISTAKES constantly invading our thoughts and accusing us. Honestly, is there anything WORSE than those prisons of our OWN MAKING? MEANWHILE, we can be confined to a small brick cell 24-hours a day for years on end and STILL BE FREE- LIBERATED like those women who found peace and joy within the hardened walls of Texas’s death row; UNFETTERED like Paul and Silas who though arrested, beaten, and thrown into stocks in the darkest part of the prison could yet sing psalms and praise God for all his goodness. Refusing to condemn their accusers or curse the whole judicial proceeding, instead of mourning their terrible fate or declaring the injustice of it all, they could look beyond their current circumstances and see that the WORST incarceration is that which takes place deep within the soul, when we feel condemned to live a joyless life of “quiet desperation”; when we despise ourselves along with everyone else and feel like complete failures; when we tire of EXISTENCE ITSELF and want nothing more than to plainly give up!

Hence, the answer to the question, “what must I do to be saved?” is rather SIMPLE- it is to do NOTHING, nothing more than give up on our OWN efforts and give in to GOD, INSTEAD. It is to cease all striving and surrender ourselves into the hands of Him who loves us with an everlasting love. When we at last learn to truly trust God, when we can go through life confident that our hand is securely in his, when we are convinced that he desires only that which is BEST for us, only THEN will we ever discover REAL love, TRUE freedom, and LASTING peace,

REGARDLESS of what we may have done in the PAST or what our situation in the PRESENT may look like. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, thank you for a love we did not know existed, deserve, or even asked for. Yet, we find ourselves graced with the most wonderful gift anyone could ever receive. Renew our spirit and cleanse our soul. Help us to let go of past mistakes and embrace the new life you offer that we may experience what TRUE freedom is about. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*