

Converted at Every Revival

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 17, 1989 (at Oxford High School). Scripture Lessons: Hosea 4:1-3, 5:15-6:6; Psalm 77:11-20; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Fred Speakman, a Presbyterian Minister, once talked about one of his home town's more colorful citizens, an old sinner called "Guv'ner" Randolph. No one remembered who first called him "Guv'ner" but everybody used it mockingly because he was the town bum. Little was known about him. The old Guv'ner was simply there. He was as much a part of the scenery as the old hotel or the Presbyterian Church in the center of town.

No one knew where he came from or when or what tragedies had led him to become the old derelict that he was. Every morning you'd find him leaning against the Post Office, greeting people with crude vulgarities and amusing comments on current events. In the coffee shop people would quote the old Guv'ner with mock respect. "Did you hear what the Guv'ner said about the Russians? What were the Guv'ner's comments on the economy this morning?"

Nobody ever thought to look at Guv'ner Randolph and wonder what kind of a person he must have once been, what ambitions he must have had once, whether the old man had ever been in love or held a job. Could he look back and remember the touch of anyone in affection or the look of anyone in respect? Nobody knew and nobody cared enough to ask.

But sometimes Guv'ner Randolph stepped out of character. Every Spring there'd be a revival and the Guv'ner would be converted at every revival. The news would flash all over town from the newsstand to the barber shop, "I hear the old Guv'ner's got religion again." It became a joke. And sure enough there he'd be out on the street, clean-shaven, his shirt pressed, wearing a tie. And he wouldn't be slouching. He'd stand tall and look

people right in the eye and greet them with a smile, his blue eyes sparkling. This would go on for a few days, never more than a few days.

You could almost watch the press go out of his clothes, the slouch come back into his shoulders. You could watch the stubble come back on his chin, and the little blue lights go out in his eyes. And he'd begin to limp visibly before the mocking townspeople: "Have you said your prayers yet this morning, Guv'ner?" "How many days has it been now, Guv'ner?" "Understand you're taking up preaching, Guv'ner." "How long do you think it's going to last this time, Guv'ner?"

That would do it every time. In no time at all they'd beat the poor old man back into the gutter with their cynical comments. In a few days he'd be back in character. And then, later, in the coffee shop the more upstanding citizens would sip their coffee, smile wisely, and say, "You know it's a funny thing about religion... You take the old Guv'ner now, he's back in the gutter and yet if a revival hits town this winter, he'll be there big as life."

But the problem wasn't that the Guv'ner got converted at every revival; the problem was that the town didn't get converted. And they didn't get converted because *they* didn't believe, and they wouldn't let the Guv'ner believe, that a man, a woman, a child can really be changed by the Good News of Jesus. They didn't believe that they had anything to do with the Guv'ner's conversion or his return to the gutter. It was the failure of religion, they thought. Many of us are haunted by the suspicion that we can't be changed... not much and that we have nothing to do with the change of another or of society. We are what we are. There's no way out of the ruts we're in. The mold is set. Somehow we've missed something right at the heart of the Christian faith, that Jesus came into the world to save

sinners.

This past week at least three members of our church went forward at the invitation of Steve Wingfield to ask Christ into their hearts. I say, at least three. There may've been more. I estimate that more than a hundred of you attended at least one service. How many of you, in the privacy of your own hearts, renewed your faith in Christ?

Maybe you've been thinking about all those people who've made decisions for Christ and you're wondering, "Will it last?" Maybe you made a decision and already you've overheard people saying, "Did you hear about so-and-so? They got converted. How long do you think it's going to last?" Maybe you've even heard a discouraging voice within yourself saying, "It won't last."

I've heard that voice many times. I can't remember a time that I didn't trust Jesus as my Savior but I do remember the first time I made a profession of faith. I was maybe about six years old. Did it last? Yes and No, because since then I've had many ups and downs as a Christian. I've suffered agonizing defeats in the Christian life but I've also known times of almost courageous allegiance to Christ. There've been times when I've fallen into serious sin and I've wondered, "How can I be a Christian?" And then I've returned to the Lord or the Lord has searched me out. Those words from Hosea are too often true of me, "My love for Christ disappears as quickly as morning mist." And so, like Guv'ner Randolph, I need to get converted at every revival.

What I'm saying is this: we can't follow Jesus today on the strength of the decision we made several days ago, or several years ago. Over half the members of the average Presbyterian church are inactive. Why? I believe most were sincere when they stood before the congregation and said, "I

renounce Satan and I turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as my Savior." What happens to them? Somewhere along the way they failed to realize that they need to renounce Satan daily and turn to Christ.

Conversion happens, not only at the beginning of the Christian life but time and again as we realize we've erred and strayed from Christ's ways like lost sheep. I recently heard a man say, "I received Christ as my personal Savior when I was eight years old but my mind wasn't converted until I got to college. For a long time I thought that as long as I had Jesus I didn't really need the Church. But I was converted again when I began to understand that the Church and the Sacraments were instituted by Christ to help me grow in my relationship to him and others. Then I began to be disturbed by the homeless, the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast and I knew I needed to be converted again. As I became more affluent the Lord showed me that my wallet needed to be converted. My whole life," he said, "has been a series of conversions as I continue to discover that Christ is Lord of every area of life."

Everytime we meet for worship, every time we receive Holy Communion, every time a baby is baptized, or a young person is confirmed God intends a revival to happen and he wants us to be converted at every revival. Every time we see a victim of injustice or racism God wants a revival of courage and faith to take place in us and he wants us to be converted at every revival. I'm not talking about good resolutions. Resolutions are never kept. I'm not talking about gritting our teeth and clenching our fists in our determination to live for Christ. Christians don't make resolutions. We make vows to God in response to his love for us in Christ. We don't clench our fist and grit our teeth in determination, we bow our heads in prayer. Each new day we renew our vows to turn from

sin and turn to Christ, by the grace of God, and if those vows are broken by evening thank God, he's promised to be there to forgive and help us pledge allegiance to him all over again. Amen.

Let us pray: Great God, our heavenly Father, revive us again. Fill each heart with your love; May each soul be rekindled with fire from above. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.