

## Timothy: A Saint For Those Who've Never Had A Dramatic Conversion

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 5, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Amos 6:1, 4-7; 2 Timothy 1:3-12; Luke 17:5-10.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Timothy was a first-century convert to Christianity." "I am reminded of your sincere faith," said the apostle. He wasn't a nominal Christian. He had a sincere faith and wanted to be a disciple yet there's no indication that Timothy ever had a dramatic conversion experience.

From some of the stories in the New Testament we might get the idea that most conversions in the early church were sudden and shattering experiences. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, people were confronted by the living Christ, and, in a flash, their lives were turned inside out and upside down.

These stories of dramatic conversions are so unlike what most of us experience. When we were helpless infants we were baptized. We went to Sunday School and church. The time came when we were asked to make a profession of faith, and we did so *perfectly sincerely*. We knelt for the laying on hands at the time of our Confirmation and the pastor prayed that the Holy Spirit would strengthen us to be Christ's servants. But we didn't experience anything unusual or dramatic. We can no more remember the hour we were born again than we can remember when we were born the first time.

Sometimes people who've never had a dramatic conversion experience begin to wonder if they've been converted at all even though they have a sincere faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. When they hear about the dramatic conversions of others they feel like second class Christians. But I'm here this morning to proclaim that dramatic conversions aren't the

whole story. It's wonderful to see how God has worked dramatically in a St Paul or Charles Colson but it's just as wonderful to see a living faith quietly passed on from a grandmother, to a mother, to a son.

When we look at the dramatic conversion experiences in the New Testament we need to remember that many of these early converts were "married and had families." When they were baptized, their household was also baptized. Do we really think their children had no experience of God at all until at some later point they experienced a sudden conversion? More likely many of those children grew up within the household of faith never knowing a day when Jesus Christ was not known and trusted.

"This is where I want to introduce you to two women whose names "occur at the beginning" of Paul's letter to Timothy. Eunice was Timothy's mother and Lois was his grandmother. The first thing Paul said about Timothy's faith was that it was already alive in Lois and Eunice. "If the apostle believed that nothing mattered but a dramatic conversion experience, he'd probably have reminded him of it right away." 'Remember that hour Christ first broke through to you dramatically and you received him as your Savior.' Instead, Paul reminds Timothy that his sincere faith first dwelt in his grandmother and his mother.

These women "communicated" their faith, "both deliberately and unconsciously," to young Timothy. Nothing's mentioned of Timothy's father. Maybe he wasn't a believer. Like many children, Timothy was most influenced in his early years by his mother. At night, before he went to sleep, his mother sat by his bed. She told him stories from the Old Testament. She told him about Jesus and his love for children. When it thundered she told a frightened Timothy about how Jesus stilled the raging storm and how he was still present to calm his fears.

And then she would pray. She thanked God for Jesus. She thanked God for keeping Timothy safe and strong. She thanked God for his promises to the children of believers. As Timothy grew older his mother taught him prayers, maybe the Lord's Prayer. At first he simply repeated them by rote like a parrot. Later he began to lisp his own simple prayers.

He went to church with his mother and grandmother, probably meeting in someone's home. He didn't get a whole lot out of the service but he learned how important it is to worship God with fellow believers and to feed upon Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In time of crisis he saw his mother turn to Christ for guidance and comfort; in times of joy he saw her praise the Lord. So, from his earliest years, prayer, scripture, and worship were as natural for Timothy as sleeping and eating. John Calvin has a delightful comment that Timothy 'was reared in his infancy in such a way that he could suck in godliness along with his mother's milk'.

"I'd guess that" most of us here are more like Timothy than Paul if we've been converted at all. It was from our mother that we probably first became aware of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit. And though we might have rebelled and kicked and screamed as a child on Sunday morning, though we might have fallen into serious sin as adolescents, our mother's faith got planted in us like a hardy seed in poor soil and slowly came alive like a flower in the Spring.

Of course having a devout Christian mother or grandmother doesn't guarantee that you now have a sincere faith or that you've ever been converted. Conversion entails a conscious response to the grace of God, and this response always must be made *by us*. Like Timothy you must *rekindle the gift of God that's in you through the laying on of*

*hands*. Paul's probably referring to Timothy's ordination when he knelt for the laying on of hands and received as a gift the authority and power to be a minister of Christ. But we also publicly received the gift of God's grace and the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands when we knelt to be confirmed, when we publicly confessed our faith in Jesus as Lord. And if we don't rekindle that gift of God by prayer and a daily turning to Jesus the faith that lived in our mother or grandmother won't do us a bit of good.

For all Christians life continues to contain a series of many conversions. Every evening calls for us to die to sin. Every morning is a rising from the dead, a new life bringing with it new opportunities to turn to Christ and serve him. Every season of our lives, from birth to death, will provide us with new opportunities and demands for conversion.

In the final analysis conversion is a mystery of God. And whether our conversion is dramatic like Paul's or quiet like Timothy's it testifies to God's initiative in seeking out those who are lost, finding them and bringing them home. What's important isn't whether our conversion has been dramatic or quiet, but whether we now have a sincere faith in Jesus. And that sincere faith means that we'll live out our lives as servants and friends of God, living in His presence, acting on His principles, obeying Jesus as Lord, and taking our place as members of Christ's Body, the Church. True conversion is not an end but the beginning of a process, ever deepening and widening until the whole person-- will, intellect, feelings and all-- reflects the mind and will of Jesus.

Let us pray: Almighty God, heavenly Father, you have blessed us with the joy and care of children: Give us calm strength and patient wisdom as we bring them up, that we may teach them to love whatever is just and true and good, following the example of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.