

Conversion

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[0 : 0 0] That clock is the wrong hour, but it's the right time, if you know what I mean, right? So, we should just, yeah, it is good to see people here who know how to change their clocks, and it's great stuff, but here we are in the Lord's house on the Sabbath.

It's a good place to be, just by way of an introduction to get right down to it. But today's topic, again, is conversion.

That's sort of obviously a Lenten theme. We can think of Lent as a time maybe when we intensify our conversion, however we understand conversion.

The concise Oxford Dictionary I find always a good place to go if you want to start to think about something. It defines conversion this way, a part of it.

Transposition is the first word it uses to tell us what the word conversion means. Transposition. And then it continues inversion.

[1 : 0 6] This surprised me a bit. I wasn't expecting this. Inversion. Especially, it continues logic of subject and predicate. And then it tells us, if no A is B, then by inversion no B is A.

That's enlightening, isn't it? Then it continues, bringing over to an opinion. Party faith. Bringing over. That seems on the surface, yes, that's what conversion is.

Bringing over. And then again, and here I'll stop with the OED. It says, turning of sinners to God. That's interesting to find.

Obviously, a nod, if you will, to the religious provenance of the word conversion. It is thought about in the world of religion, faith, that sort of thing.

Turning of sinners to God. This morning, I hope, I hope you'll agree with me, better than a definition, as a most beautiful picture, a kind of word picture, even a kind of music picture of conversion.

[2 : 2 0] We'll look today, you have it before you. We'll look at George Herbert's poem. I hope you know George Herbert's poem, Love 3. Love bade me welcome, it famously begins.

Love bade me welcome. A glory, a glory of a poem. Love bade me welcome. So there it is today. A bit of a struggle, if that's the right word. A bit of a struggle with a word, the word conversion.

And then stepping inside, hopefully, the meaning of this word in a poem. If you will, from a lovely word, a word made famous by another great poet.

What is the inscape, if you will, of conversion? You know, Jerome Hopkins made the word inscape famous again in our culture.

The inscape of something is a powerful, powerful thing to search out. What is the inscape, again, of conversion? So again, let's look at a word, conversion, and then via a great poem, try to crawl inside the meaning of the word.

[3 : 3 1] That's the introduction. Before we go a moment further, let's say a word of prayer. Our God, we thank you for the gift of Sabbath when we remember your resurrection from the dead.

And that you have called us to come to you. Your love has bade us welcome. And we come to you now and ask, but by means of your spirit, you'll help us to grow in the things of our faith.

That we may know you and love you more. Our God and Father, we pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen. Amen. Conversion.

Conversion. I hope you do. Conversion, I think, is a Lenten theme, isn't it? When we die away from oneself and are born into another self.

Conversion. Conversion stories, you'll know them well. Conversion stories in the New Testament are always interesting and they're somewhat various.

[4 : 39] Paul's conversion, you'll agree, is a part of our culture's received symbolism, isn't it? Paul's famous conversion. He was knocked down on the road to Damascus.

He was blinded there. A life there completely transformed. There's a transposition for sure.

Paul on the road to Damascus. I just, from memory, I put this list of conversion stories together. The Ethiopian eunuch.

There's another conversion story. He heard a passage from Isaiah, you'll recall, unfolded for him. He had been reading the passage from Isaiah and then, again, it was unfolded for him.

You know the story so well. And then he was baptized and continued, as the scripture says so sweetly, continued on his way, rejoicing. Another kind of conversion story.

[5 : 41] Peter, he seems, I think you'll agree with me, Peter in the New Testament, he seems to have been converted a number of times.

He had a few conversion moments in his life. Transformations, transpositions unfolded the faith of Peter, the faith for Peter.

One more, the Roman centurion in Acts 10, he was filled with the Spirit in a very dramatic manner. Again, you'll remember that story. And then he received baptism.

His conversion story, you'll remember, was part of Peter's further conversion. They overlap somewhat, those two stories, in terms of conversion.

More in a moment about Peter. But this is a detail which instructs for sure. Peter's conversion in his faith was deepened by the conversion of the Roman centurion.

[6 : 57] Conversion is helpfully thought of, it seems to me. I've been reading a bit of scholarship about conversion narratives in the early church.

Early, early church, say up to 300. And then the later early church, say out past the Council of Nicaea, the conversion of Constantine. What happened to conversion narratives after that, out to about 600?

It's sometimes, conversion is helpfully thought of as a drama of, we have it up here today in front of us, this high-tech presentation we have for you.

Conversion is helpfully thought of as a drama of belief and behavior and belonging. And some kind of experience associated with belief and behavior and belonging.

Again, so we have Paul's conversion story, a kind of divine epiphany appeared to Paul. The Lord appeared to him. The eunuch, his conversion story was a straightforward event upon the reading and hearing of Scripture unfolded for him.

[8 : 15] Again, for the famous Roman centurion, the spirit descended upon him. And his conversion was what we would call, must have been just complete.

He was converted to the mystery of Jesus in a moment. The spirit descended upon him. Quite, again, various pictures of conversion here.

Peter, again, Peter was certainly converted, wasn't he? The New Testament, as we zero in on Peter, we see him changing at different times.

I think we can call it, he's converted differently at different times. Peter was converted surely at his calling. I think Peter is probably at the calling of Jesus, come follow me. There's a kind of conversion there.

He leaves an old way of life and sets out on a new way of life. When he made his great confession, Caesarea Philippi, you are the Christ, the son of the living God.

[9 : 14] It's a kind of conversion of his belief there. He has a deep insight into who Jesus is. And he's told by the Lord that the Father had revealed this to him.

Perhaps when one of my favorite moments in the New Testament, the New Testament has so many glorious moments. When that great hull of fish occurs in Luke's gospel.

You remember it brought Peter to the end of himself in a sense. And he speaks those mighty words, depart from me for I am a sinful man. That's a sign.

I think that's another great conversion moment of Peter's life. He saw the majesty of Jesus. He said, I can't even have you in my presence, Lord.

Depart from me. Great moment. There's a conversion moment. I'm a sinful man. Even again, perhaps at his restoration, famously at the end of John's gospel.

[10 : 12] You know, you know, Lord, that I love you. Another deepening, another kind of conversion moment for Peter. Peter, I think we can safely say, had many conversion moments.

The faith unfolded for him. We were talking out here over coffee a while ago. So, speaking of the gospels, as you know, I hope you know, Professor Tom Wright will be in Vancouver in July for a week of teaching on Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia.

You know, a most seminal document for and in the very issues regarding the very founding of the church, if you will. And Peter, I think we can say, we have another picture of Peter's conversion is unfolding as you see the letter to what happens in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Peter, we see Peter is converted there in another form of conversion happens for him there. And Peter was converted.

He was one of the great converts. But conversion, here's to come back to what's in front of us today, what we mentioned earlier. Conversion as belonging, we might say, this one aspect of conversion, was not, had not become quite clear for Peter.

[11 : 43] And that's what we find Peter realizing as Paul writes to the Galatian church and rehearses his controversy, his argument with Peter about circumcision and membership, belonging to the Christian tribe, if you will.

Yes, belief, behavior, and belonging have, is what conversion is all about. They obviously overlap a lot.

Very much do they overlap. They have a very real strong family resemblance, if you were. But they may be distinguished.

Conversion. Conversion has been likened to, to use a more modern language, which is sometimes used in studies of conversion.

Conversion has been likened to, or it is described in modern language as a kind of re-socialization. Conversion speaks to questions like, where do you gather?

[12 : 54] Each of us today here made some effort today, in a special way, to gather at church. And it speaks to who we are, what we believe, what we've been converted to, if you will.

Here we are gathering in this place. Yes. Conversion speaks, therefore, to, with what kind of folks do you associate? You can usually, over time, tell a lot about a person, what they believe, what they want to shape their behavior, by where they belong.

Where they show up. Where do you hang out? I go to church every Sunday. Has to do with my conversion story. Circumcision and baptism are obviously about belief, but they're also about behavior, obviously.

But most directly, and this is what you see unfolded in Paul's letter to the Galatians, and what Professor Wright will be speaking about for a week.

Tom Wright has written so much about Paul to the Galatians, what that great epistle means, how it unfolded in the early church.

[14 : 10] Circumcision and baptism, again, are about belief. They're about behavior, but again, they're about membership issues. Peter, in some measure, as we know from the New Testament, from the book of Acts, he drew back from fellowship with Gentiles.

Peter had been converted. Peter knew the Lord. Peter was, in our language, saved. He was on his way into the kingdom. But Paul hadn't worked out what conversion meant in terms of membership yet.

Paul had. Peter hadn't. Conversion has something to do with membership. And again, Paul, famously the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul corrected Peter about this great issue of the sign of membership.

Membership issues are, again, involved in conversion. These are, again, wondrous, quite involved, and instructive issues to study.

So much to learn here. And again, at Lent, we, if you will, we renew, we intensify, perhaps we broaden, as it happened for Peter, what is involved in our conversion.

[15 : 40] Conversion. Conversion is, again, about many things. Membership, for instance, in the early church.

A membership in the early church, say early as out to the year 300 to begin with. Membership issues there was, that was a central thing to figure out if you wanted to belong to the tribe called the Christians.

Your membership there was quite central. Again, belief and behavior were there, of course. They were always there. But if you will, in a sense, some scholars argue this.

Membership was perhaps the first issue that you had to think through in regards to your conversion story. And four, you will agree, for obvious reasons, membership was a central thing regarding one's conversion.

For obvious reasons. To be openly a Christian in those first early centuries, say out to the year 300 roughly, could be, as we all know, very dangerous.

[17 : 01] Convert to the Christian faith. Okay, that's good. And then openly and publicly show up. Gather with Christians.

That might be dangerous. If that's part of my conversion story, I got a problem with becoming a Christian in the first three centuries. Private spirituality.

Religion is what you do in private. That's what a secular culture is now teaching us to believe again. Yeah, that's great. But once gatherings of people start to happen in crisis situations, power notes that and worries and sometimes works to contain you.

Go to China right now. Going to church is dangerous. Having private spiritual experiences in China is not dangerous.

But showing up in gatherings of Christians might be dangerous. Conversion as membership is sometimes a big issue.

[18 : 37] And it certainly was a big, big issue for early Christians. They had to work that stuff through. But isn't it interesting?

And this may be instructive. And it's sort of an obvious point. No new thought here. The church was dangerous in those centuries. And at the same time, apparently, it was becoming quite attractive to people.

That's an interesting paradox. Sometimes when the church is in big trouble and is getting persecuted, that's when the church is doing something right. Maybe we should take heart from the fact that our law in Western cultures is...

Talk to Sue Norman. She's been to conferences where inter-varsity global people get together. You know who they have to have in as special speakers now?

Lawyers. To figure out how to protect themselves on university campuses throughout the Western world. It's getting to be a bit of a problem in places to be a Christian.

[19 : 47] Law schools? Nah, we don't want law schools with Christian behavior standards. We'll close them down. Won't let them get off the ground. You know, the early church was both a dangerous place to gather.

Your conversion meant membership. And it was also becoming attractive. That's a strange thing, but not too strange to work out. You know, should I join that group?

Well, I want to because it's an attractive group. And for many, it was an attractive place to be. There you go. Just in passing, it was, I think, in the letter to the Galatians, I think you'll agree with me, that holds a clue as to why the early church became, as Paul died and the apostles died off, out into the second century and into the third century, more and more people came into the faith.

Why did they do it? One clue is staring us in the face in the New Testament. The famous words. In Christ. Famous words. In Christ, Paul says, this is what Peter had to hear as his conversion drama unfolded and intensified.

Peter hadn't quite got this straight yet. In Christ, there is neither male nor female, Paul says. There is neither slave nor free. Peter, are you hearing in Christ there's neither Jew nor Gentile?

[21 : 23] Peter, have you got that yet? Your conversion. You are converted, Peter, but your conversion has to be intensified regarding membership issues.

The gospel has a public effect on how human beings are going to gather and on what terms they're going to gather.

Paul saw this in his conversion with total clarity apparently. But Peter was following along behind.

His conversion of belief and behavior had to be again intensified with a clarity about membership. Conversion involves this kind of membership.

Can't resist passing along this little anecdote. A classicist named, some of you probably saw this clip, there's a clip about it.

[22 : 20] A classicist named Tom Holland in the UK. I'm not sure if he's a friend of Tom, right? But they were interviewed together on some UK radio show that went into intellectual issues.

But this classicist, Tom Holland, he made some waves in the United Kingdom. Apparently he went public with this view in the Guardian or some major publication in the UK.

He made the case that the most revolutionary writings in history, he asserted, The most transformative writings in our culture, he said, are the letters of St. Paul in the New Testament.

And this is his metaphor, not mine. He said they're like deeply planted depth charges that throughout history have been going off and transforming social, intellectual, deep assumptions about who we are and how we should behave in the world have constantly shaped law and economic relations and everything.

Paul's vision of what it means to be a human in Christ, the greatest writings in the world. So stated Mr. Holland, the classicist. No idea if Mr. Holland's a Christian or not.

[23 : 43] I hope he is, of course. Of course, when he said this, there was a riot of response, angry denial from people saying, No, no, no.

You've got it wrong, Professor. It was really the Enlightenment that taught the world tolerance and love of people and equality between races and gender, etc.

No, it's the Enlightenment. Now, this classicist is Tom Holland. Say, no, no. The extent that the Enlightenment got that, they learned it from the Christian witness. You find it most clearly expressed by Paul.

But there you go. I am not ashamed of the gospel. Paul famously said, in our time, both in the church and in some measure in the world, certainly the learned world, I think a new question has become, I am not ashamed of Paul.

The Episcopal Church of the United States is to some extent now officially ashamed of Paul. The lectionaries edit out Paul.

[24 : 58] Where Paul says things that are offensive to modern Western culture, Paul's just dropped. He's an offense in the Christian church. That's shameful, really, for sure.

But Paul's a hot topic. He was in the early centuries, and he remains a hot topic in our own time. That's why learning more about Paul in the New Testament from a learned guy like Tom Wright is a good idea.

I'm flogging Regent College right now. He's coming this July. There it is. Because conversion is belief, what we believe.

Conversion certainly involves behavior, how we will learn to behave in the world as we turn to Jesus Christ. And it speaks deeply to where we will belong in the world.

In some measure, our public commitment. Where I hang out, the kind of people I hang around with. Where my public confession is about what I believe.

[26 : 08] Paul deeply addressed these kind of issues. Certainly is, again, repeating myself in the letter to the Galatians, where we hear about the apostolic decision about membership issues.

Membership is obviously a part of our conversion story. Baptism. Dying with Christ in baptism. is really the chief public marker of membership in the body of Christ.

That's why even out there in the desert, the eunuch was converted, and they just immediately baptized him. There had to be this sign that he had died with Christ on the cross, been raised with him in resurrection, and now he belonged to the community of those who confess that Jesus is Lord.

Then doubtfully, there's nothing there about, did the eunuch go home and start to change his behavior? I would think he did. He certainly had a belief shift, a transposition, to go back to our definition.

And certainly his membership somehow would have been changed. So belief, behavior, membership is always at work in the story of our conversion.

[27 : 29] So there's a bit about Paul, the earliest church, the later early church, even Christendom and what's its status.

How did Christendom handle belief, behavior, and membership? You're thinking Christendom, membership became one of the chief aspects of conversion.

You were a member of the converted world, if you were. How much belief and behavior caught up to membership? That's a big issue in Christendom.

But conversion took the membership aspect of conversion and made it almost central, didn't it? The whole Christian past in our time is hotly contested.

And as we mentioned, when Professor Holland remarked that Paul's epistles about these things have changed the world. The world said, no, no, we can't take that.

[28 : 30] But that's just by way of saying the past is a war zone. You know, who are the Christians? What do they believe? What kind of behavior do they insist upon? What are their membership issues?

How do you understand membership in the Christian scheme of things? What about the church and your loyalty to it, your membership in it?

So, if asked to summarize Christian conversion, a lot of this is sort of the, if you will, the surface issues of conversion, again, belief, behavior, membership.

If asked to summarize Christian conversion, even, if you will, summarize what Paul's whole message was about as he unfolded the gospel in the first century.

Make it short, please. Someone might say to me, make it accessible. Why would anyone find the Christian faith attractive? What about that issue? Why did people in ages of persecution of Christians still find the church attractive?

[29 : 41] Why were they drawn to it? Why would they do the dangerous thing and express themselves publicly in membership of the Christian church? One answer might be, well, look for a great Christian artifact which by consensus captures the gospel of Jesus Christ and just study it with care, with some care.

A something like, I bet you guessed it, a something like, this is, I'm showing my own prejudices here, but I'll defend it to the last moment. Great Christian artifact which teaches the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, what was believed by Paul, what was believed by the first century Christians, by Christians in Christendom, Christians all the time.

I would look at something like, well, George Herbert's famous poem called Love Three. That's what I want to do now, just to flesh out, if you will, what Christian conversion is.

Why be a Christian? Someone in the first, maybe at the year, 150, was thinking about that. Why should I be a Christian? Why should I be a convert? Why, why attend to the writings of the gospels in St. Paul?

Why spend my life doing that kind of thing? Why should I attend to anything in the New Testament? Well, the best answer is simple.

[31 : 13] I would say that at the end of the day, and this is again, we turn now to the, as we mentioned at the introduction, try and look at the inscape of what conversion means.

Conversion is turning, in one word, conversion is turning to the God of love. Conversion is belief in the God of love.

Conversion is learning to behave as one who believes in the God who is love. Conversion is wanting to be a member of a community where the God of love is celebrated, rejoiced in, and taught all the time.

God is love. Love, hence we turn to this poem now. You have it in front of you. The very heart of the gospel begins by saying with this poem, love bade me welcome.

So this poem of, of Herbert, again, to just unfold for a little bit, the inscape of what conversion is.

[32 : 23] In a group, in a group study, by the way, a little, a Bible study, maybe a reading group you belong to, you might read this gospel saturated poem and just talk about it.

If you're reading group or your Bible study group is a bit, a bit, getting a bit, um, what's the word I'm looking for? A bit tired, a bit, a bit, dreary.

It happens to groups, doesn't it, sometimes. Just put this poem in front of the group and let's say, let's, let's, let's read this together and think about it. Love, bade, me welcome.

Again, um, take such words for granted, but there it is. Here's a great, beautiful, obviously, I call it again, gospel saturated poem from a great Christian poet, a great man of God and he says, love, bade, me welcome.

What a, what a great opening to a poem. Uh, just take that for granted but I think, no, I won't take it for granted. I'm going to read this as if with fresh eyes. I tried this during the past week.

[33 : 25] I mean, do I believe this? Is this what my conversion was all about? Love, bade me welcome. Um, I guess I thought, well, I'll gloss this poem as I go through it a bit.

Yeah, love, bade me welcome. God is love, says the New Testament. God is love. God, he, who loves in freedom, a great theologian put it, God loves in freedom.

I love that definition of God. God, he, who loves in freedom. Love, Soren Kierkegaard said somewhere, I'm always, I remember the first time I read this, found it so moving. The 19th century, people were starting to talk about equality a lot.

You know, there's a great movement towards equality in different ways. And that's a good thing, for sure. Kierkegaard said, all people are equal only in one way. He said, that no one has ever adequately thought about how much they are loved.

That is profound. That's the only way in which we're really equal. we can never get to the, we'll never exhaust the question, how much am I loved?

[34 : 35] How much are we each loved? We'll spend eternity, I take it, exploring the mystery of how much God has loved us.

And nothing else, at the end of the day, what, how else could we understand eternity? The infinite, almighty love of God will spend eternity exploring it.

God is love. Yes. I think, is it pride and sin that makes us, I ask myself this question, that makes me suspicious about God's love?

Maybe, there must be a catch. One of Marilyn Robinson's characters thinking about God's love says that there must be a catch.

And we think there's probably a catch. I'll bet God made me welcome. I wonder what the catch is. What's he got up his sleeve?

[35 : 38] A bit afraid of God. I've been told he's fierce. Scary. Love made me welcome. It's as if God in the gospel, there's no catch.

I have loved you with an everlasting love. There's no catch. Love made me welcome. It demands soul work, I think, to believe in God's love.

I think I've come to believe that. I think I, I believe at some level of me there's a catch. I bet there is. He's got something against me.

Somewhere in his infinite mind, he's going to pull it out someday and say, there, I got you. But love bids me welcome. Love says, come to me.

Again, I think there is soul work here. Paul doesn't say things like, God is love, doesn't he? Paul is more inclined to say something like, he that spared not his own son.

[36 : 42] that's how Paul will talk about God's love. Who would give up their very dearest love for sinners, for his enemies?

God's love would. He spared not his only son. God is trying to convince us there's no catch.

I love you more than you love yourselves. God may love us more than God loves himself, some theologian once said. God is love.

And conversion is believing that. Conversion is learning to practice this in some little measure, some pathetic little participation measure.

We try and become a people who have practiced love. And we yearn to belong to a community which practices love.

[37 : 49] It has to be that too, doesn't it? We see that we might get fixated on just, oh, I believe in God's love. But then another part of the Christian drama in history is, well, but do you practice it?

And another part of it, well, does your community practice? Do you, that's why the social gospel, I think, rears up sometimes. And I think it's a work of the Spirit.

Does the community love God? Do you love as Jesus loves as a community? Reaching out to a world of misery and injustice and do you speak to it?

So conversion is just my belief. I said the creed this morning and I'm glad I did. And I'm urged to behave within my conversion and I'm encouraged to think about the church of Jesus Christ as a community which works out this mystery of God's love.

Belonging to a community which practices this is a great thing. That's why the church grew in the first two or three centuries, almost for sure. Scholars from all sorts of different backgrounds see that this was, the Christians were somehow different.

[39 : 01] Christians did perish. It's not a tall tale told by, for Christian polemical purposes. Christians did die in different places, the empire.

They did die holding hands with one another, slaves and slave owners, men and women, maybe Jew and Gentile, sharing the kiss of peace as they died.

That was real and the world noted that. These Christians are different. They're trying to work out a new vision of what it means to be human. They're actually working out some kind of vision of the world which involves love at its center.

They believe God is love. God in his son died for the world, for them and for the world. God sends them out to help the poor. Early Christian catechism sometimes would ask the new one wanting church membership.

Do you love the poor? That was a sign that you were a serious follower of Jesus Christ. You had to behave as if you were believing in the God of love.

[40 : 11] Do you care about poor people? Do you care about the suffering? When that started to work out in the early centuries, people knew the Christians were different and they started to come, even when it was dangerous.

Yes, I do think there's a catch and that's why yet my soul drew back. First thing that Herbert reminds us of.

Love made me welcome but my soul drew back. Yes, my soul always draws back from this for some reason.

But love will form faith in us. Love teaches us repentance. This morning, for instance, I said the words over at the 730 service, we have erred from your ways like lost sheep.

So I belong to a community that practices repentance, at least publicly. We try to be that kind of a community. Love will teach me to repent of my sins.

[41 : 18] That's for sure a Lent theme, is it not? Then Herbert, I have to rush along here and need time for conversation. Herbert goes, I hope you're looking at the poem itself, Herbert goes to the very heart of the gospel here.

Love argues with, love reasons with, the one who draws back. I am not worthy to be here, says the one who has responded in some measure to the call of love.

Love bade me welcome. No, I'm not worthy to be here. But then love replies, you shall be worthy. You shall be he.

I want you in my presence. Do not draw back. Come to me. Love bades me welcome. Then more argument occurs in the poem.

I cannot look on thee. Second stanza, fourth verse, is it? I cannot even look on you. A bit of a Peter moment there. Lord, depart from me.

[42 : 22] I'm a sinful man. But no, the Lord will not reject us. I cannot look on thee. The answer, well, you're looking with your eyes. Who made the eyes but I?

I'm your creator. I know all about your eyes. I know all about your sinful past. I know all about the sins you're going to commit in the future. But I am baiting you into, I'm beckoning you into my presence.

So it's almost as if the gospel says, I command you to believe in my love. Do not draw back from God's love. The answer, who made the eyes but I?

I, God, the creator, is love. But I have marred them. The sinner keeps arguing with God's love, part. Herbert says, I think, with such an insight.

I want to argue with God's love. I have marred them. But the creator is the savior. Know you not, says love, who bore the blame?

[43 : 22] There's a nice, simple, gospel, evangelical moment. How often the church needs to say that? Jesus, bore the blame for your sins.

Finished fact. He bore the blame. He beckons you into his presence. One more act of resistance then occurs according to this lovely poem by George Herbert.

Strangely, isn't this interesting? I've never seen this before until this week. The next objection takes the form of humility, apparent humility.

My dear, says the sinner to this one who is love, I will serve. How's that? I'll serve you. Then I will serve.

I will serve you. And again, for the first time, maybe in the commentaries, this is there, if it's there, I've never seen it. Much like the prodigal son here at this moment in the poem, who proposes, as you'll recall, when he returns to the forgiving father, that I'll become like one of the hired servants.

[44 : 32] Okay? I'll work off my sin. Maybe I'll impress you by working off my sinfulness in the far country. I'll become one of your servants.

But the father, the forgiving love, the one who is love, named love in this poem, will not have it. No. You must sit down, says love, and take my meat.

I will not be served by you. I am here to serve you. Love bade me welcome. And love wants us to be in its presence.

And love wants to be our servant. And give us food to eat in eternity. So, finally a surrender. So I did sit and eat.

This is called, this is Herbert's most, I don't know if the word is correct, his most mystical, his most eschatological poem. He takes you right into eternity.

[45 : 38] Now, eternity begins now, and then we head towards it. Is that the right picture? You'll tell me in the discussion time. This morning, alas, I took it standing up, but someone handed me bread and wine again.

I received, the Lord served me again today at his table. You sit down and eat. I'm the savior here. I'm the servant.

I'm the one whose love is triumphed. You will be served by me. I am here to save you. Is there a catch, Lord? I want to draw back.

I really do. Love is hard to believe in. Kierkegaard's got it right. We have great difficulty believing that God loves us, that he's handled our sin.

He took care of it. So I did sit and eat. I did sit and eat. A perfect outcome, isn't it? The poem begins, Herbert's a genius, isn't he?

[46 : 48] Love bade me welcome. I did sit and eat. That's the whole story. That's the triumph of love. An argument in between.

Love says, come into my presence. So I did sit and eat. That's the whole story. A second century convert, speaking of conversion and converts, we draw to a close here.

A second century convert, St. Cyprian, thought of conversion as an empowerment to do the impossible. I like that.

He was speaking especially there about St. Cyprian of if your conversion in means really living by someone in any way towards the behavior of Jesus Christ, well, it's impossible.

So this conversion thing he thought must be empowerment to do the impossible. And conversion is in a sense an impossibility. But God's grace begins to work it out in us as it did in Blessed Peter who took a while to get it straight over and over again Blessed Peter.

[48 : 02] But empowerment to do the impossible. It is good to say Jesus Christ forgives. But I think it's better to say almost that he is, if you will, our forgiveness.

He forgives but he is our forgiveness. He is the love that enacted, he became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

He is the triumph of humanity in the Father's presence for us. For us. So I think conversion is a good word to struggle with.

At every point along life's way and at the point of death, I paraphrase a great 20th century theologian, at every point along life's way and at the point of death, the Christian confesses, I believe, in the forgiveness of sin.

That's finally, according to this theologian, what conversion really is. Your life may be a mess, you may be faltering along the Christian way badly and usually a lot of us do.

[49 : 20] Some make a better show than others. But we believe this. I believe in the forgiveness of sin.

Who bore the blame? But I. Sit and eat. Love tells us to surrender. I am love.

I am saving you. I believe in the forgiveness of sins. God's love. That is accepting God's love. Just to conclude, in our belief, as the foundation of our behavior, we believe in the forgiveness of sins.

We can live in freedom now in our behavior because God has forgiven us. And the blessed cause and proclamation of the church, the very place of our belonging is the place where we hear that our sins have been forgiven because God is love.

You know, there, there, I'm struggling with what conversion is. That's inadequate, an inadequate look at an inscape, again, of what conversion looks like.

[50 : 33] And I find in this poem a perfect description of it. But conversion is belief. Yes, our minds are transformed. It's behavior. Yes, submit your whole self, as Paul says in Romans 12, to God.

And it's belonging. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together. The place where God's love is celebrated, where the confession Jesus as Lord has made is a special place.

It must be defended from error and confusion, as Paul did in the letter to the Galatians, with that very converted apostle who needed his conversion deepened by understanding more profoundly what membership in the church is all about.

So, and adequately, I hope you take the George Herbert poem home with you, and it's a blessing to you at Lent. Conversion, what it looks like on the outside, if you will, what it looks like on the inside, I hope that's a contribution to our Lenten season, which has just begun.

Thank you for your patience, and let me say a word of prayer, and then we can have, I hope, good conversation about these things. Lord, we thank you for the gospel, which we need to grow in more and more all the time.

[51 : 53] Help us to know more about your love, more about your forgiveness, more about our call to live inside of these gospel mysteries at all times.

Thank you for bringing us together here as the church to believe more profoundly, to behave more faithfully, and to belong to the church of Jesus Christ without apology.

Lord, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.