

“TURNING, TURNING, WE COME ‘ROUND RIGHT”

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I find that sacred music frees up the gospel and the reality of God at work in my life, helping me experience and convey it. Simple Gifts is one such hymn for me.

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

I realize the staccato salsa rhythms rattling the buses of the Dominican Republic differ radically from this lily white folk hymn written by Shakers of Maine in 1848. Still, toiling in the D R, I found myself humming this tune and mouthing its words.

By going to the Dominican Republic to build cinder block homes with Habitat for Humanity for a week, it *simplified* our lives. Dig the footers, mix the concrete, lay the block, fill the gaps with mortar. Over and over, until the layers take shape. Stand back, dust yourself off, and behold what God has accomplished: a home!

It's startling how purifying simple manual labor is for people used to sitting in front of computer screens. Even more, such basic effort done as a team frees us up. It united us to literally pull in the same direction. We as Americans don't taste this joy of genuine community often enough, so very enamored with our individuality.

Once we adjusted to that balmy island greenery, so different from the zero degree commutes you faced, and we adjusted to strenuous daily effort that left no need to visit the gym every night, that space in our lives felt like *a place just right*.

Once we worked side by side with families who would occupy the homes, one of which was set on the lovely edge of a yucca field with cows grazing, it felt like a *valley of love and delight* to picture Elias, Adele and the daughters dwelling there.

Frankly, it felt like a humble blessing to get in trenches and dig a new life with dreamy, determined dirt poor people whose stamina amazed us. Humbling, but not demeaning. Following Christ to such places, *to bow and bend we were not ashamed*. And the last phrases of the hymn especially help to convey the deepest the spiritual impact of such a trip: *to turn, turn will be our delight. Till by turning, turning we come round right*. Let me say a little bit what those words mean to me.

When asked why I do this, my most basic and straight answer is it helps me get my head screwed on right. It sweeps away my envy, resentments and grievances as smallish self-indulgence. It grounds me to live from a better place that often escapes me. It centers me and gives perspective to live my life as God's simple gift.

It makes me glad for the life God has given me here, but not in a way that feels like it is at the expense of others. For it ties our destinies together in such a way that acknowledges, there can be no real joy for one of us, until there is joy for all. When Christians talk about salvation, we make it too individual, not as universal.

Our faith has a word for all of this. The word emerges in our story from Acts. It is a familiar story, Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. We Protestants revere the apostle, and cherish his turnaround as a template for making Christians.

Beginning with Jonathon Edwards and his colonial revivals that still reverberate, we have celebrated spiritual change through encountering God in Christ. Generations have walked the "sawdust trail" of tent revivals giving their life to Jesus, to get "born again". American Christianity has been a road-to-Damascus religion, full of instantaneous, miraculous, and wholly consuming personal conversions.

This American, emotional and individualistic interpretation of Acts ch. 9, however, misses a crucial detail in Paul's unfolding story. For after his powerful encounter with Jesus on the road which strikes him blind, some Christians rescue Paul and take him to the city to heal his blindness. Paul writes in Galatians he then "went away at once to Arabia." What was that about? Paul says he went away for 3 years—almost like my 3 years in divinity school—to learn about Jesus as God's way in the world. Only after that period of reflection, prayer, study, and preparation was he fully converted to engage a greater destiny as apostle to the Gentiles.

So Paul may have been stopped in his tracks on the road to Damascus, but it took three years of living in Christian community and being steeped in Christian practices for him to be truly transformed. Notice that the Bible, even with all its breathless enthusiasm in Acts ch. 9, regards the change we call conversion as a process unfolding within a community of practice. I hope that puts the word conversion back into play for people like us, people mostly suspicious of the word.

Before going to the Dominican Republic, I told participants I would treat this work trip as a spiritual pilgrimage. That concerned some. Would I disallow some from having a cold beer after a day of hot, dusty, exhausting work? Not even close. C. S. Lewis once famously said of the Puritans, our spiritual forebears and the Americans who created those Great Awakenings, "they hated bishops, not beer."

By spiritual pilgrimage, I hoped to engender conversion in a Christian community of 13 by doing the things Jesus said to do. Conversion less in the sense of being stricken down blind on a road and more in the sense of Paul's simple turning by apprenticeship within spiritual community, learning basic practices Jesus said,

blessed are the poor, the meek, the humble, and those hungry and thirsty for righteousness. We worked with such as these and God blessed us. Jesus said, whoever gives a cup of water to drink in the name of Christ will by no means lose their reward. We shared cool clean water among us and with native co-workers so as not to perish from fatigue. These waters are not unlike the baptismal waters sprinkled here. Jesus said, whatsoever you do for the naked, the imprisoned, the hungry, and the homeless, you do unto me. We worked with those striving to overcome their privation and could see the face of Christ within their faces. Of course, we also had morning meditations, evening prayers and communion the last day to interpret faith in action and get beyond a shallow do-gooder mentality.

Our lesson from the letter of James is also about conversion. He speaks of conversion as ongoing process. He writes of conversion as seeing the logic of the gospel, so different than the logic of the world, worshiping fame and using force. For James conversion brings our attitudes and actions into friendship with God. This takes time because utter consistency in faith doesn't occur in one fell swoop. It is slowly and painfully gained through turning and turning, till we come out right.

I invite you to ask any of the 13 participants if their lives have changed as a result of going. I hope and predict they will attest to transformation within them in ways small and great. I know that I feel it every time I go. It turns my head right around to the place just right. It leads me out to find Christ in a valley of love and delight.

Conversion is more than a once in a lifetime mandatory emotional spasm, with all of them unfolding according to some preset formula. Conversion is also banding with the faithful, getting outside our comfort zone and into places where Jesus said to seek him. C.S. Lewis said that following Jesus Christ must begin anew every day as though we had never done it before. May God convert us all daily.

Early on half of our group worked among the two families with whom Habitat was building two sturdy bathrooms. It wasn't easy, those initial stages. Let's just say all the reasons for their needing bathrooms were fully evident in that setting. Without any complaint they cleaned up the site so it was suitable for construction. Even that, I tell you, can be the occasion for glorifying God, for turning back to God. How can that be? Hear this poem from Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan writer.

"In the most obscure and sordid place,
in the most hostile and harsh,
in the most corrupt and nauseating places,
there, O God, You do Your work.
That is why Your Son descended into hell,
in order to transform what IS NOT
and to purify that which IS BECOMING.
This is hope!"

We gladly share our reinvigorated hope unearthed in turning, turning back to God.