

The scripture lessons today may invite us to consider a very basic question: *How did you become a Christian?* Or, perhaps, the question for you might be: *How may you yet become a Christian?*

I ask the question both ways because the Episcopal Church does not fall into the tradition of some other churches which focus on “believers”. One of the key aspects of the Believers’ churches of evangelical Christianity is their conviction that the church should be defined as those people who have had a conversion experience and believe in Christ. The Episcopal Church of course respects conversion experiences and invites belief. But there is a shade of a difference that makes us...how can I say it...a more motley crew? And I don’t mean that in a bad way.

People find their way into the Episcopal Church through different paths—and we welcome those paths:

- Some were baptized as infants in the Episcopal Church, or another church, and then spend time among in church, and eventually come to profess their faith by being confirmed by our bishop.
- Some were baptized as infants in the Episcopal Church, or another church, and then never quite got around to being confirmed, or they are ambivalent for various reasons about their faith. But they are part of our family.
- Some were not baptized at all and have not confirmed their faith but they want to be here among us and we welcome them. For a variety of reasons of their own, their faith is unresolved. They need time.
- And there are some who have been baptized and confirmed, and remain members of another church, but for various reasons want to be here, and they are also welcomed into our church.

And there are possibly a few more variations in the pathways by which people find themselves here.

The people who are in an Episcopal church can come from very different pathways and so can have different relationships to conversion and belief. You could say that in that way we are a very imperfect church and sometimes a potentially confusing church and I wouldn’t disagree. It does create its own set of challenges—such as preaching :). But Believers’ churches have their own set of challenges. We are all imperfect churches. But I have to say that, overall, this kind of church is the kind of church I want to be a part of.

I am more at home in a church that casts a wider net like we do. And which recognizes the potential complexity for different people to follow the path to becoming Christian. And I am more at home in a church which doesn’t so quickly make distinctions between outsiders and insiders.

I’m sure that, for me, I feel more at home in a church like Grace because I grew up experiencing in various ways being an outsider. And for as long as I can remember back to my early childhood, I’ve had a philosophical nature which has recognized complexity more than simplicity. And my own path to belief has included infant baptism, confirmation, perplexity, stepping away from church, reconversion, returning, more perplexity, more faith, more perplexity, more faith.... It’s complicated. :) So perhaps I was destined, in a sense, to become an Episcopal Christian. Maybe some of you may feel that way too.

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It is important sometimes to think of such things. And the Gospel lessons from *last Sunday* and *today* may lead us to think of such things. If you were here last Sunday, and if you recall, the *Gospel of John* gave us a picture of how the first disciples began on the path of becoming Christian. Well, there was no such thing as “Christian” at that point of course--that came later,--but in the very beginning it was a matter of becoming a follower of Jesus. As the Gospel of John tells it, some of the first disciples of Jesus were *first* disciples of *John the Baptist*. And one day they overheard John exclaim, upon seeing Jesus approaching, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” And they were like... “What?!” “Who?!” And you can imagine John just pointing at Jesus. And then two of John’s disciples started, literally, following after Jesus, seeing where he was *going* and what he was *saying* and *doing*, until Jesus at some point turned around, and putting them on the spot, said: “What are you two looking for?” And they said to

Jesus: “Can we spend some time with you?” And they remained with Jesus that day. And then they became *Jesus’* disciples.

That kind of path toward becoming Christian is more like mine and probably many of yours—a path that takes some time, maybe even a long time, spending time in church and spending time elsewhere, until you finally can say: “I believe”. And maybe even then the path does not stop there but keeps taking turns when you need to find new ways, at future times, when you can say: “I believe”. The *Gospel of John* recognizes that it can be that way.

But the *Gospel of Matthew’s* story of how the first disciples started following Jesus is very different. We get no sense that the disciples were in a process of *figuring things out*—we get *no psychological insight* there in how one may become Christian. Instead, as Matthew tells it, Jesus was walking along, he saw some men, and said: “Follow me.” And they did. And at considerable personal cost. It isn’t obvious that there was even belief present in their decision yet. In fact, we will later discover that they had plenty of *mistaken* beliefs about Jesus. Instead, these first disciples of Jesus heard a call from Jesus that was so compelling that they *obeyed*. And then they spent years afterwards trying to figure out who Jesus is and what it all means. Especially in Matthew, the path to becoming a follower of Jesus comes from an almost overpowering revelation bearing down on those men—a power so sudden and unexpected, that their lives are immediately unhinged, diverted, and redirected.

Something like that may have been your path to becoming Christian. Or there may have been moments in your longer path to becoming Christian that also included an abrupt redirection of your life, by some power of God, that you could not fully understand at the time, but was utterly compelling.

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I hope you can recognize your life in one of these paths—the path as told by John last Sunday or by Matthew today. Or if you don’t then the time may come when you will. Because the stories of the path to becoming Christian that John and Matthew tell are equally true but may reach into our lives differently, at different times, depending on who you are. You may need some time. Or you may be abruptly redirected. Or both.

In a way, it doesn’t ultimately matter how we become a Christian—but that we do. As long as we don’t make the mistake along the way of counting ourselves out, because our path doesn’t look like someone else’s. Preemptive exile from God...is an exile of our own making—and not the making of God.

The greater reality here--whatever our own psychological experience of the path to faith may be--is of the calling of God to all people. This is the testimony of both John and Matthew:

- “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light (Matthew)”.
- “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not over come it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, [has] come into the world (John)”.

The greater reality... is the light of God...calling us each... in so many different ways.