Palm Sunday, March 26, 1972
THE MIRACLE OF CONVERSION
Matthew 21:1-11

Among other things, the story of Palm Sunday, which we just heard as our scripture lesson, tells us that the City of Jerusalem, and the people in it, faced on that Sunday, a choice, an unavoidable choice. Jesus was coming into the city. Some were hailing him as King. What would the people of the city do with him?

What a relief it would have been if they had not had to face that decision! I suppose that the city as a whole did not want to accept him, and they did not want to crucify him. If only they could have dodged the issue and done nothing about him. What a relief!

We can see this desire to side-step the matter later in the week in the person of Pontius Pilate. He certainly wanted to avoid making a decision about Jesus. Accepting him was preposterous, yet crucifying him was distasteful. Why did he have to have anything to do with him? Pilate even symbolized his desire to avoid the whole issue by publicly washing his hands of the matter. But that didn't solve the problem. Through the centuries, Christians have recalled Pilate's role in the whole affair in the Apostle's Creed-- "crucified under Pontius Pilate."

So, this Palm Sunday 1972, and every year, reminds us again that throughout our lives, just like the people in Jerusalem, just like Pontius Pilate, we all face choices and decisions. And like PILATE and many others, we all have an instinctive desire to side-step issues. We are all escapists, wanting to run-away from diffi-cult decisions; wanting to put them off as long as possible, and naturally so, for making decisions is some of the hardest work in the world.

We also know that we usually make decisions only when some pressure is applied. If we could only put it off — but then we are pressed to take action. In every realm there are personalities who present the world with forced decisions. Jesus is one of those!

I'm sure that many of the people in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday wished that Jesus would've stayed away. Why did he have to come into the city now? Why was he forcing the issue? Why doesn't he give us more time to decide? Doesn't he know that in coming here he is likely to start a riot and get himself killed?

How we wish we could escape into neutrality? How we try to avoid taking a stand! But there is really no such thing as neutrality, for whatever we do or don't do is always affecting someone else.

Life is not made for neutrals. Jesus said, "He that is not for me is against me." So again, Palm Sunday, and what followed throughout the week after, dramatizes in unforgettable fashion the fact that life is made up of one decision after another.

But what is it that makes people decide for one thing and against another? What is it that helps people change — that "converts" people? "Conversion" is a word we don't hear too much about in some of our main- line Protestant churches. We don't use it very much in the United Church of Christ. Part of the reason may be that the word has come to be associated too much with cc limited idea of what conversion is.

I recall a visit I had some time ago with a young woman who had been converted at an evangelistic rally. The emotional excitement had died down by the time of our meeting and she was back where she began or perhaps further back. The warm and wonderful “glow” had faded, and she was now not only distressed by her original condition, but by the fact that she felt that she had fallen down on her “conversion,” broken her vows, lost her Christ. She wondered- “had she really made a decision?” Had she really been changed? Can people change? If so, why do they change back or seem to?

The more we talked, and the more I have thought about it since, this person had perhaps allowed herself to accept a premature solution to a problem she had not fully explored. Maybe she came to terms with Christ on too narrow a front or issue, accepting Christ at the point of her weakness and/or failure rather than also on her strength and goodness. She did not see conversion in grand enough terms. or as something that meant happening continually! Also, she had not become part of a continuing community of persons who could give her strength and reinforce the change that had taken place in her, and so she felt herself slipping back to where she had been.

The question of “conversion” of being able to change or being born again as the New Testament puts it, is a part of all of life. Yet, we’ve all heard the old saying- “you can’t change human nature.” But the miracle of conversion we are talking about says the opposite — "human nature can be changed.” All sorts of things are possible.

Have you read the autobiography of Malcolm X? In it, he describes his utterly brutal childhood. His father was killed when he was a child, his mother driven to madness. He knew extreme poverty and hardship. Yet Malcolm X not only survived a bleak and frantic near chaotic childhood but wrote a moving and sensitive book about his life, including his early years. And more significantly, he was a man who in his last years was being reborn — he was going through a profound spiritual crisis. He was becoming a spiritual leader toward the end.

Some weeks ago, in a sermon, I mentioned another man, who in his autobiography talked about his rebirth — an ex-convict, Bill Sands. Were these persons unusual? Yes, to some degree! But it has been the experience of countless people that complete change can and does take place within their lives. They are “born-again,” or “twice-born” persons. But what does it mean?

I think that when St. Paul talked about the “new person” or the “twice-born” he was trying to say that we don’t have to be what we once were, and that we can be more than we presently are, and that every day (even every minute) of our lives offers us a chance — to demonstrate our ability to move, walk, gain territory on ourselves, realize for ourselves a certain coherence, a certain spirit of openness and concern; to grow and change.

There is an enormous amount of evidence which tells us people are many things and can become many things. Thus, the miracle of conversion is based on the fact that each of us carries within himself (living in us even if not available or apparent) all kinds of resources and possibilities for both good and evil, and some of them may be hidden and known to no one, including the particular person in question. But what is needed to bring about change, conversion? Another Person!

It was part of the unique genius of Jesus and others like him to be able to bring out those good hidden resources and strengths in a person or in a group. It’s almost as if people if given the proper encouragement or signal, can suddenly organize and bring together qualities they

either vaguely sense in themselves, or don't stop and think about, or do think about, but have in the past dismissed — all because the world "outside" or some per- son or group has suddenly said "yes" rather than "no" or "now" rather than later.

Conversions or changes in people or groups come about in a variety of ways. For examp1e, we know that when 1aws are changed and then enforced rigorously, people also change; they respond to new legal and social and political realities. I know people who said they would never go along with school desegregation. But they did, and quickly, once it was the law.

Perhaps there is nothing surprising in this. People seem to accommodate themselves sometimes too readily to changing historical situations or events. On Palm Sunday, the people shouted "hosanna" and greeted Jesus as a King, and then a few days later when the climate around them changed — shouted "crucify him!"

What we know is that there are all kinds of possibilities in people; there are all kinds of qualities that can emerge, given an enabling historical moment, given the encouragement or discouragement a society offers. As the events of Good Friday dramatize, there is also, in most of us a large capacity for violence.

In New Orleans, a decade or so ago, we saw mobs form around little black children going into white schools. About a year later in Atlanta, there were no mobs and no violence when black children there went into white schools. Does that mean that the "mental health" of Atlanta's citizens was better? Does that mean Atlanta's citizens are of sounder mind than New Orleans's citizens?

I don't think so! What it means is that the City of Atlanta at a particular moment in American history would not allow a mob to form. The city of Atlanta, for its own various and mixed reasons — commercial reasons, reasons that had to do with the "image" of the city, and good moral reasons could tell thousands and thousands of people, not in an explicit and didactic way, but in vague and indirect ways: look, cool it, refrain from behaving in certain ways, don't take to the streets, don't lose your tempers, and don't even try to start trouble — because it won't be sanctioned or tolerated.

Such exchanges go on indirectly all the time. People, we here too, constantly take our cues from the world in which we live; the kind of climate or atmosphere that is created. Thus, if there is forthright moral leader- ship in a situation, people will often respond to such leadership, despite their past "positions" or attitudes. People will change, be converted, grow!

So, this miracle of conversion is a mysterious business. What we are is a function of so many things: accidents, incidents, things that are unpredictable and that yet become the most important things in our lives — things like whom we meet, or where we live at one time or another. So, our lives can become crucially, profoundly changed because we admired a teacher or camp counselor we only happened to spend time with, or because by luck met someone here or there who later became a friend, a wife, a husband, or because of the climate, atmosphere of a group, etc.

But, if such decisive moments can happen in all of our lives, how much more could happen, might happen, if people were to come together and make it their business to want certain things to happen, want an atmosphere to exist in which change is possible, in which events keep taking place and, in that way, encouraging us to take notice and learn, and again, change.

We can also help others change for the better! This person Jesus comes at us in so many ways. He asks us to forsake a pharisaic view of human nature which is flat and single-minded, which constantly sets up niches and categories, totes up sums, adds, subtracts, looks at people with a view to checking them off, labeling them, oh so strictly defining them. Christ said, “No!” He insisted that there are dozens and dozens of possibilities in all of us, so we simply cannot be fitted into an accountant’s language, even a theological accountant’s language. He declared that anyone can be saved; and he reminded us that there is an ineffable and mysterious quality as to exactly how salvation comes about.

But this we do know from Jesus — the miracle of conversion begins when we begin to see ourselves and others and help others to see themselves as more than we are or they are.

So many people in our time have given up because their possibilities have never really been pointed out to them and encouraged. Too often, rather, there is a kind of constant tendency to declare that certain people are only such and such, whether they be called middle Americans or silent Americans, or Panthers. Every time we label people, we are placing limits on them. We are putting up barriers.

Jesus and his followers continually were breaking through barriers. The outcast tax-collector was more than a tax-collector, the hated Samaritan more than a Samaritan, the prostitute more than a prostitute, the hippie more than a hippie. Continually, Jesus turned his ministry toward the social outcasts, and he sees all of us as redeemable. He sees us both more and less than we appear to be. The rich and powerful person can be a hypocrite and a fraud; the poor and scorned person can be honest and decent.

To be converted is to not only see ourselves as different and more, but to see others and the whole world in a new light.

The miracle of conversion! Who knows what we can and will become, or what others can and will become? Isn’t it often surprising how one era’s outcasts can become the next era’s heroes as history has shown, including Christian history? Jesus and his followers, however despised and scorned and ignored by Pharisees and generals and prominent officials of one kind or another emerged as, after all, people who were growing, who were blessed, who were the sign of a new age, who were becoming born again.

Which of today’s outcasts, or those who are scorned or seen as cowards or even traitors, will become tomorrow’s heroes? The miracle of conversion! Jesus knew that new birth, new life may well appear in surprising places and under many guises. There is simply no end to the mystery and the actuality of rebirth that is always occurring in our midst.

God grant that re-birth, conversion, may be constantly taking place among us and in us. Amen.