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Bridge Street United Church

September 8, 2024

Sixteenth after Pentecost – Creation Time 1

Readings: Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 125; (James 2:1-10); Mark 7:24-37

### The Conversion of God and Jesus

Can God or Jesus be converted? To what? Traditional belief holds that God does not change, nor does the divine Jesus. The human Jesus, needs to be subject to change if he is to be similar to you and me. To convert means to change from one thing, one idea, one belief to another. If I replace the gas furnace in my home with electric heat, I have converted my heating system. Conservative Christianity makes its primary goal to convert non-Christians to Christ. Can God or Jesus, change their way of being, change their purpose, or their mission? I think not. Each can be, I believe, challenged as to what each is doing at any given time. That is my sense of what we read this morning from Exodus, Moses, and God, and Mark, Jesus, and the Syrophenician woman/mother.

Our Bible is Holy Scripture, it has a clear story line to it; some use the term biblical narrative. Women play minor and major roles in moving that story along – from Genesis to The Revelation. Put the words “Women in the Bible” into your search engine and up will pop 39 names and stories of women in the Bible, along with enough reading to keep you going for a couple of days.

There are high points in that story line. In Genesis, the Creation stories focus on God, Adam, and Eve. Eve is usually understood as initiating their explosion from the Garden Eden, a rupture in the divine/human relationship as it was created. Equally, we note there would not be any biblical story line at all without Eve. That new and troublesome relationship between God

and humans, carries forward through the entire story, and marks it profoundly. Sin is now a part of that relationship. Although they continue as God's people, God's creation.

Abraham and Sarai and Hagar, clearly demarcate two different peoples, the people of God and the people outside that circle; those folks throughout the remainder of the biblical story, are known as gentiles. That tension between God's people and the gentiles shapes the remainder of the biblical story.

Naomi and Elimelech leave Israel and go to Moab because of a food shortage. Living there for a number of years, Naomi's two sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Elimelech dies, as does her two sons. Naomi decides to return to her people and Ruth decides to go with her. Ruth makes that profound promise to Naomi: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God (Ruth 1:16)" Back in Israel, Naomi does a bit of matching making and Ruth become the wife of Boaz, all in the family. Ruth, a foreigner, will become the great grandmother of King David. Gentile women, are absorbed into the family. Bathsheba, a Hittite, becomes the mother of Solomon. Lydia supports the Apostle Paul.

The Samaritan woman at the well reveals a part of Jesus as she converses with him. Mary and Martha open broader dimensions of discipleship. At Jesus' cross and tomb, the women were there. Mary, the mother of Jesus. All of them are essential to the biblical story; some mark pivotal turning points. Each contributes to our understanding of our relationship with God and Jesus. In a sense, how God acts, how God is.

Quite old stuff this biblical story, we might say. Have we not left all of that behind us? Consider the costly war between Israel and Hamas today. The staunch conservative wing of the Israeli government, believes in restoring, what they refer as the Kingdom of Judah, which will

have no room for a Palestinian state or the Palestinians. Judah is the name of part of King David's Kingdom. This belief is opposed by what this commentator calls the High-Tech State of Tel Aviv. Both sides of this divide are Jews, but their world views are very different. It continues to be about the same tension around who are the people of God, how are they defined, who otherwise is let in?

Moses is up on the mountain receiving the ten commands, the laws defining how God's people should live in community and worship God. At the foot of the mountain, the people feel insecure and think their God has become lost somewhere. Joshua fashions a golden calf for them to worship. God sees what is going on and is angry, very angry. God says to Moses: "Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them (Ex. 32:10)" God will destroy them! Moses doesn't try to defend the people; he remembers the story of the Flood. At the time of the Flood, God destroys all of creation except Noah and those on the Ark. Further, God then promises never to utterly destroy creation again. God puts the rainbow in the sky as a reminder. Now God in anger wants to do just that. Challenged by Moses, the bible tells us: "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people (Ex. 32:14)." At the Flood God gave up the option of destroying God's people. Going forward, God's relationship now with the people is divine love, forgiveness, and grace. That option continues through the biblical story. God wasn't converted; God was reminded.

The Syrophenician woman, a despairing mother of an ill daughter, asks Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus tells her he must go first to the people of God. Note again the division between the people of God and the gentiles, the foreigners. This unnamed mother challenges Jesus, telling him the Gentiles still eat the crumbs from under the table. She doesn't question Jesus' powers to heal, that's why she is there. She causes Jesus to question what he is doing? He has been going

around talking about the Kingdom of God he is now initiating, a Kingdom which will include all, Jews and Gentiles. Here he makes a distinction. She doesn't convert Jesus; she reminds him of what he is saying he is about; what he has said he is about. Jesus heals her daughter.

These two biblical stories suggest that we, as disciples of Jesus, need to remind ourselves, as we confront the challenges and tensions in our own living, what we are about? What is our discipleship about? What have we said it is about? We need to open ourselves to a Moses or a Syrophenician mother.