

**TURN, TURN, TURN**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 1B (Trinity) – Jn 3:1-17*  
LPC, 5/31/15

*'Tis the gift to be simple; 'tis the gift to be free; 'tis the gift to come 'round where we ought to be.  
And when we are 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.*

That iconic song is part of our American heritage. It particularly recalls something simple and pure in our country's legacy. But it is more than an American folk tune.

The song is, of course, an old Shaker hymn, or more accurately, as I discovered in my research, a dancing song. The Shakers, formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, employed body movement in their worship, which is the origin of their popular name. This song was apparently composed to accompany this worshipful movement. Presumably, when they sang "Turn, turn," they would literally be turning around.

This is Trinity Sunday, a particular celebration in the church of the God we Christians recognize as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is a difficult concept, and on Trinity Sundays in the past I have taken it upon myself to try and elucidate Trinitarian doctrine in my sermons. This Trinity Sunday I'd like to try something a little different, and take my principle inspiration from the day's scriptures (what a novel idea!) and that is why I've begun with this song about turning.

The scriptures appointed for today are about conversion, and conversion means nothing more nor less than turning. More accurately, conversion means "turning toward:" the "version" part meaning "turning" and the "con" part meaning "toward." In a Christian context, conversion means turning toward Christ, or turning toward God.

A lot of Christians have taken their cues about conversion from the story we just heard from the Gospel of John, where the Pharisee Nicodemus comes to see Jesus and is told, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." This last phrase is also translated "born again," as you know.

Jesus goes on to say, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." This has been taken to mean that if you want to be saved, you must intentionally undergo baptism (being "born from water") and some kind of extraordinary spiritual experience (being "born from Spirit.")

Many Episcopalians probably do not accept that interpretation exclusively. It is beyond the scope of a ten-minute sermon to explain why. But I'm willing to bet that many in this room were baptized as infants, without a say in the matter, and that many would have trouble identifying in their own lives a single event that might be called a "born-again experience." Some of us have had one, and others have not.

As an example of people in the latter category, I have heard people say, "There was never a time in my life when I did not know God's love." I daresay that is the most powerful argument for infant baptism.

So what does “conversion” mean for those of us who have been Christians for as long as we can remember? The same thing, I would propose that conversion means for everyone, whether or not they have had a one-time experience of accepting Christ as their personal savior. Conversion, by my definition, is the continuous, lifelong experience of turning toward God.

The Friends of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, a monastic community based in Massachusetts, send out by email a daily inspirational message. One last week read, “By God’s plan and design, our conversion is to be a lifelong experience. In other words, conversion is not a one-time thing.

As the Shaker song says, “To turn, turn will be our delight till be turning, turning we come ‘round right.” Although there is an expectation in that song of finally coming round right, there is no indication that we achieve one perfect position and stay there permanently. When “true simplicity is gained,” we will still be bowing and bending.

God may be unchanging in that God is eternally present and almighty, but God is not static, and neither are we. God is kind of like the sun, and we are like planets. The balance of the galaxy depends on a lot of turning. Planets not only revolve around the sun, but rotate in their own orbits. In a way, planets are constantly turning toward the sun. Consider that our moon must be in constant rotation in order to always face the earth. And so we too must turn, turn to continue facing God.

In our relationship with God, we must constantly reorient ourselves toward God. What is right at one point in our lives rarely serves indefinitely. In my spiritual direction practice I’ve consulted with people who believe they have lost their faith, when in fact they have simply turned with the seasons but failed to reorient themselves toward God. The spiritual life must be a supple, responsive thing: “to bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed.”

I have recently read a book called *Falling Upward: Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* by Richard Rohr. I have been recommending this book to anyone who stands next to me for more than ten seconds, especially people in middle age or better. In a nutshell, this book’s premise is that spiritual needs evolve as we age. If you find that the faith practices and attitudes you have always held don’t have the same punch they used to, this book may be for you.

Not only does age invite continuous reorientation to God, but daily life provides many opportunities to turn, turn to God: those petty annoyances that cause us to curse our fellow human beings, or inanimate objects; those moments of self-absorption or self-justification; not to mention the big sins like gluttony, covetousness and lust. “To turn, turn will be our delight.” Oops –time to turn back!!

One of the most appealing things about the song *Simple Gifts* is its gentleness. These daily, even hourly conversions I’m talking about are not wrenching life crises, but are often just a simple turn, turning, associated not with shame but with remembering that we are children of love and delight.

Turn, turn, and keep turning. The valley of love and delight awaits.