

**16 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22 – Year A – October 5, 2011 - Homily**  
**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

One of the most beautiful Gospel songs I know is called *Give Me Jesus*, and includes the following lyrics by Jeremy Camp. “In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus... When I am alone, give me Jesus... When I come to die, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, just give me Jesus.” I think Paul would have been singing this one all the time if it had been written a couple of thousand years ago!

In tonight’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he shares some of his thoughts and feelings as he reflects on his own conversion and faith in Christ. In particular, he focuses on how knowing Christ has significantly changed his perspective on life, and success. Paul’s writing still hits home today. He uses terms that we easily relate to like gain and loss, value and power, goal and prize. Yet he uses them in a new way to help us to recognize the transformation we also experience in Christ. Let’s take a closer look.

Paul speaks of his life as a Pharisee with a kind of pride at first. He hit all the mile markers and key bragging points of a serious religious career and member of the zealous inner circle. Such was his passion for the traditions and teaching he had studied and learned, including the Torah, that he confesses his initial persecution of those who followed Christ’s teaching. As you probably recall, Saul became Paul after he met Jesus in a profound and highly personal revelation on the road to Damascus. Meeting Jesus is just the beginning for Paul, and similarly for you and me. We are now some years down the road of Paul’s new life in Christ, and the changes that he is now reflecting on. It takes about seven years for almost all the cells in our bodies to be renewed. The exception is our brain cells, which don’t change. It also took Paul years to work out the implications and details of his new relationship with Christ Jesus. In the reading, he tells us that he’s still working towards that goal.

For Paul, as he describes his own faith journey, the goal of faith is to know and experience Jesus, and to be found in Him. Nothing else is worthy of our boasting in this life. Not the great educational level we’ve achieved, the super salary, the big house, our family, the career achievements, other accolades, or anything else. In fact, he goes so far as to say that knowing Christ is the only real thing in life, and the one worth giving up everything else for. The NRSV translation doesn’t quite do the Greek full justice in its use of the word “rubbish”. Other meanings that Paul may have had in mind for all his earthly achievements include dung, worthless and detestable! As we all know, one person’s trash, is another’s treasure, as in I don’t need all these fancy clothes to be happy, but someone who hasn’t got much to wear might really need them. Not so sure how that might work with the dung translation, except perhaps to think of something in our lives that has caused a real stink, or sullied our ability to worship the Lord. Paul sets aside any possibility of self-righteousness, even righteousness achieved under the Law, and especially those things he gained by his own merit. The bottom line for Paul, and for us, is that our entire lives are a gift of God’s grace. It really is a new perspective – in the same vein as the truth that it all belongs to God! My life, all the gifts and resources in my care are a blessing of God’s grace. And I assure you, I’m acutely aware of the unmerited aspect of God’s love and grace. I really haven’t done anything that might single me out for such extravagant and abundant blessings. The gift is purely because of who God is, and by virtue of what Jesus has done for us. I hope and pray that we have

all accepted God's gifts, in the full knowledge that only a fool rejects God's love in favor of anything else.

This kind of movement and transformation from our own initiative to God's will for our lives is a huge paradigm shift. The big steps are coming to Christ in faith, allowing the Holy Spirit to renew our minds, and welcoming Christ as the ruler of our hearts. Everything in between are the visible and outward signs of these changes. What we see from Paul's life, and our own lives, are distinct changes in our lifestyle, our way of being in the world in word and deed. For example, we start thinking a lot less about ourselves, and a lot more about others. It certainly doesn't happen overnight. This changing perspective unfolds as our life in Christ broadens and deepens. Do you remember learning how to ride a bike, how to swim, or how to drive a car? In our humanity, bound by the linearity of time, there are distinct phases to learning and embracing any new skill. When we decide to do something new or different, we move through a process. Usually this is from conscious incompetence to unconscious competence. We go from being absolute beginners or novices, through several levels of learning, until the habits of our hearts become just that – unconscious and proficient. We don't have to think about getting dressed, we just do it. As our faith grows, we don't have to think about living with integrity or within the context of Christian values, we just do it. In many ways, and for many reasons, I'm not the same person I was ten years ago, five years ago, or even last week. Neither are you. We are all still learning new aspects of God's will for our lives. Jesus is still grasping on to each of us, and gently pulling us forward, away from a worldly perspective and worldly distractions, into a God-centered perspective, and a Christ-centered focus. The Lord doesn't want us to settle for trashy cultural acclamations, or the stuff of the world, when we can experience the glorious prize of an ever-deepening and growing relationship with Him. As well as the real honor of serving Him in this life, in the sure and certain hope of enjoying our everlasting life with Him and in Him.

As disciples of Jesus, our righteousness is defined by being in right relationship with God, Christ and our neighbors. The more we lose ourselves in Christ, the more we become our most authentic self in Him. That is what it means to find ourselves in Christ. We are unique and gifted individuals, beloved of God, and equipped for His service, as members of Christ's Body. In relationship with Jesus we too start to appreciate just how many of our losses are really gains, and how many of our assets become losses. This passage invites us to reflect on all the things in our lives that we think of as gains and losses, as well as what we value the most. The Lord is helping us to change our perceptions as much as our perspective, which in turn changes our behaviors. What are we ready to throw on the trash pile or to let go of, for the sake of knowing Christ better? By God's grace, how might that make room for something new in our lives? Are we ready to forget what lies behind and strain forward for the prize of "the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus"? Can we sing with integrity, "You can have all this world, just give me Jesus"?

Amen.