

5th Sunday, Lent, C

In a popular phrase, it is sometimes said of certain people that they “have gotten religion.” What that usually means is that someone has joined the church or become active in the church and has given up some of his bad habits.

Sometimes we can learn more about a person from his off-handed comments than from his organized and formal statements. Such is often the case with the Apostle Paul. All through his writings he drops one-sentence remarks which serve to tell us what kind of man he really was.

An example of this is found in today’s reading from his letter to the Philippians. The over-all passage is a carefully testimony in which Paul tries to tell what the Christian life means to him. But in the course of his statement, he makes this almost casual comment: “I have been grasped by Christ.” That brief sentence contained insight into the life of Paul. It tells us who he was and why and how he lived the way he did.

He was a man possessed; Christ had taken hold of him. We sometimes speak of a person “getting religion.” Well, Paul’s experience went beyond that. He had had religion for a long time; but then one day the process was reversed, and religion, or more; specifically, Christ had gotten him and had become the dominating influence in his life.

Now, on the surface, that may sound like a bad case of religious fanaticism, the kind of thing most of us want no part of. But it isn’t that at all. The type experience that Paul describes is not as extreme or uncommon as we might suppose. Nor is it exclusively religious.

In this world, there are all kinds of things that take hold of us. Some married couples here know what I mean. When you were very young, you began to hear, and to see, and to learn about love. In the teen-years, you began to experiment with it, dating and maybe dating one person steadily. Then there came a time when you

fell in love; and either suddenly or slowly, that love took hold of your life. Now, you have been married for many years; and you do not so much possess love as love possesses you.

The essential meaning of our lives is found in those things that take hold of us - children, work, friendships, hobbies, great music, and great art. None of these experiences is really ours until it moves into that realm of which Paul spoke, where it takes hold of us.

Especially this is true in regard to the religious faith. Often we describe our religion in terms of belief. Beliefs are important, but if we stop there our experience is at best superficial. Each of us believes in all sorts of things that never appreciably affect our living. A man's real religion lies in that something that has taken possession of his life. Paul not only believed in Christ, he had been grasped by him. And your religious faith and mine has not become real until it has become that kind of experience.

Perhaps, we should remind ourselves, at this point, that sooner or later something takes hold of everyone of us.

And by that I mean that something possesses us at the very core of our being. Something becomes the dominant theme of our lives. There are those who would protest that thought, insisting that they can go through life, without ever belonging to anything or anyone. That, my friends, is an illusion.

Absolute independence is a dream. We are not made that way. Ultimately, something gets everyone of us. Just take a look at life and see all of the things that take hold of people. Alcohol - think how many people belong to a bottle. It is incredibly sad and could happen to anyone. Drugs - here we think primarily of the young, but it doesn't end there. There are homemakers and business men who make it through the day only with aid of pills. Greed - some people think of virtually nothing the entire day except money and how to get more of it.

The list is unending, but the point is plain - sooner or later, something takes hold of every one of us. If not faith, then fear; if not hope, then despair; if not self-giving, then self-seeking; if not the high, then the low - something gets us all. That, my friends, is a realistic fact that we all must live with whether we recognize it or not.

There is, therefore, certain urgency to our theme. As we think of this process inevitably going on in every life, I find myself wondering what is taking possession of us. Something good or something bad? Something far-reaching or something shortsighted? Something liberating or something enslaving?

Seeing, then, the scope and seriousness of the matter, we need to look once more at Paul's statement: "I have been grasped by Christ."

Does that sound to you like some kind of religious bondage? If such be the case, talk to the man who is a slave to his appetites; he can tell you what bondage really means. The truth is this, thing that Paul mentions is the most liberating experience the man can know.

No man is ever fully free to truly be himself until he has been grasped by Christ. That kind of commitment opens the door to every high and holy experience that the human mind can conceive. To belong to Christ, to be possessed by him does not exclude one thing in this world that is worthy and right and good for the individual life.

And the most stimulating part is this: The least among us can be possessed by the greatest. That is one of the most exciting truths that we will ever face. Our ordinary minds can be mastered by Christ's magnificent ideas. Our small lives can be caught up in his eternal purpose. Our simple words can convey his marvelous message of love.

Those twelve whom Jesus gathered around him in Galilee were, for the most part, plain and simple men, much like us. They were ordinary people mastered by something great. And they stand to this day as a symbol of everything holy and good. Think of it, you and I can stand for the very same things with our lives in our time. Ordinary men and women who have been grasped by Christ - the hope of the world has always been in them, and still is.

Paul knew the meaning of real religion and real living; Christ had hold of his life. Who or what has hold of yours? Something does. Anything less than Christ is a comedown, and you are the only one who can change it. **Amen.**