

This Lenten season I've talked about baptism and then conversion, and baptism as an entry point into the converted life in Christ, and our Christian experience as a life-long sequence of mini-conversions all along the Way. We've started with beginnings, paying attention two weeks ago to Paul's very dramatic conversion on the Road to Damascus.

It seems a lot of the scriptural descriptions of conversion into the life of faith do not seem to have our name on them. For instance, the woman at the well in Samaria is going about her daily business, and who should be there to engage her but Jesus. She trudges out her front door—in the blazing heat of the noonday, lest she run into the respectable people who will judge her—to fetch the daily ration of water. She meets her Savior and ends up sprinting back to town, overflowing from within with the Water of Eternal Life, to tell everyone who will listen to go check out this Jesus.

Not to mention Saul of Tarsus. He was so certain that these followers of Jesus were a menace to the true religion of God and he was so dedicated to God that he went about trying to imprison, sometimes kill the Jesus people. You know how the risen Christ zapped his lights out on the Road to Damascus, gave him his assignment, and the apostle Paul was never the same again. Not even close.

Not to worry: the point is not how God gets our attention in the first place, or how dramatically we got interested in Jesus in the first place, or when or how we were baptized. The point is how we live out our lives in relationship to the Savior who has called us by name, who has created us for a divine purpose, who has a new life and a new life-assignment and an eternal destiny and end for each one of us. We drift more or less aimlessly, more or less unsatisfied, more or less alienated from ourselves and others and the universe, until we decide to trust in Jesus—this decision is what we call “conversion.” (You all know better than to think then it gets easy, or that God magically, instantly fixes everything and we're “good to go” forever after. But you also know that a seismic life-change is set in motion from which we would never want to return.) The point is not how we start out the life of faith, but that we finish strong.

One of the things I like about this account of Paul's life-inventory [Phil 3:4-11] is that we get a rare glimpse into a converted life looking backward, back toward the beginning. Paul was an older man, a few years before he was to die, assessing what was valuable to him. I am awed with gratitude when I think how fortunate we are to have had a man such as Paul who had lived with such loyalty to Jesus, and by so many before me who have lived faithfully to Him and have taught me in word and deed—and I am grateful to be surrounded here by many of you who have also been striving to live in obedience to our Lord. What a privilege for us to learn from Paul: when he wrote this letter to the Philippian church he had been living in day-to-day prayer and risk and obedience and trust for some 30 years after he experienced the risen Christ.

To look back into the present tense of our lives today in the light of God's future allows us a valuable perspective. The gathering dusk of a life faithfully lived adds nuance and heart to those of us still somewhere, we presume, in the noonday or afternoon of our lives. Jesus knew the importance of living in the present while guided by an unshakable understanding of God's end: “In the world you will have trials and

tribulations, but be of good courage: I have overcome the world.” Live strong because God can be trusted.

I think Paul’s “Great Re-evaluation,” this retrospective bio of what he had experienced in the three decades since Jesus introduced Himself does have something to say to Corona del Mar-type people, people like a lot of you. (Not just to the fallen women and the failures and the reformed gang members and the downtrodden.) Instead to those, like Paul, who are “somebodies,” who have accomplished something, who have risen to the top.

At first, it may appear that Paul is simply bragging—listing all the things he’s most proud of, all his accomplishments. You all have better manners than that. But this is not bragging—we only hear this list because Paul knows the church at Phillippi is under attack, and Paul will do anything he can, from afar, to prevent them being led away from Jesus and His gospel. Those undermining Paul’s message of freedom in the love of God rather than bondage under the Law and wrath of God [a difference between Stage 2 and Stage 4, if you were here two Sundays ago] tried to say they were more qualified than Paul and therefore their interpretation of the gospel was more valid. We just heard Paul’s response to that attack—not merely a self-indulgent tirade of boasting. And I appreciate that you in this congregation know the difference between a pastor merely boasting, or “trying to create a cult” or a personal following, and one who will vigorously strive to prevent you from being diverted back into a deadening and false gospel of inertia; a false way of being Christ’s church. (End of editorial.)

Paul’s list of qualifications takes some interpreting. He’s saying something like, “If those who are leading you astray want to play this game of flashing external credentials, I can far outdo them at it. I can play that game better than anyone, even though it’s the wrong game to play. They think I misunderstand what it means to be a Jew, and that they’ve got it right because they’re more Jewish than I am? Oh, no. But listen. I was born a full-blooded Jew; I was circumcised when I was eight days old, just as the Law requires; I have spoken Hebrew from Day One (I am not a newcomer convert who speaks Greek first and has had to learn Hebrew to understand the Scriptures.) I am a Pharisee, top 2% of my graduating class: nobody argues or understands or keeps the minutia of the Law better than I did. (Graduated under Gamaliel—like getting my Ph.D. in Physics from Einstein at Princeton.) And you think those others are more committed than I? Which of them actively tried to exterminate the Christian Church as early and as whole-heartedly as I did? None of them. They question my righteousness under the Law? They think I’ve lapsed and gone to seed now that I understand the love of God better, as if I want to disgrace the One to whom I owe my life and eternity and everything I now hold most dear? Nope: I am blameless in keeping the genuine Law. I’ll match my record against anyone’s, and I’ll raise them and call them.”

This is where I think Paul is more talking our language in Orange County, in our neighborhoods. We’re proud of different specifics from his inventory, of course. But many of you know what it is to have wound up at the top of the heap, do you not? You know what it is to be proud of all sorts of various accomplishments, do you not? (I have too much false modesty to mention where I went to college, but don’t think I wouldn’t like to see us beat the Trojans just one more time during my lifetime in football, or win the NCAA basketball tournament, or some more national tennis championships. But if I think any of this has anything to do with me, in the year 2006...I need to get a life!)

Here's what I like about Paul's perspective, and that of many of you in this congregation. You are not fooled. (Verses 7-8) "Whatever *gains*, assets, accomplishments I enjoyed, these I have come to regard as *loss* because of Christ..." Just because Paul has offered his life to his Lord, and to live passionately for His sake, doesn't mean he turns stupid. (On the contrary: his was one of the most brilliant, and best trained, minds in the history of Western civilization.) He does not have to—will not—play pretend. He still speaks of his credentials, his accomplishments as "gain," as good things. I hope you do, too. You have worked hard and reaped the rewards? Terrific. You have a few degrees after your name? You have done well, invested well? You have made commitments and kept them and applied yourself and gotten ahead? That's what you're supposed to do. Those are good things, not bad. (It's not as if God only loves, only has plans for, only can use rejects and buffoons and failures—although many of us who have weathered our own "personal purgatories" also know that part of the equation is true, also.)

Hear the force of what Paul is trying to tell us. Not only does he regard the less savory aspects of his former life as "loss" compared with "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus [his] Lord"—and remember Paul was an accomplice to murder, and he had once had a tendency to look down his nose upon non-Jews—but over the decades Paul has matured in his outlook until we hear this "Great Re-evaluation"—even those things which were most good and praiseworthy, in and of themselves, he now considers to be comparative rubbish ("dung," literally.) And you know what could make such a difference in Paul's evaluation of things—you know Who makes such a difference in our lives. In your life.

This incomparably brilliant man, this single-minded saint had gained more life-experience in three decades than a hundred other people, more track record at following the leading of the Holy Spirit than a thousand other people—and after this full and faithful lifetime he was able to tally up all that had been valuable to him: [on this side] his upbringing, his family, his education, his travels, his many accomplishments, all the world had to offer—and [on this side], knowing Jesus. No comparison. Knowing Jesus. Every time.

Where do you stand in your own "Great Re-evaluation?" Are you there with Paul? Do you evaluate your life, looking backward, as he did?

Not exactly? Me neither. So we stay at it. The same risen Lord who so loved and called out to Paul loves you, and keeps calling out to you. Paul didn't get his act together in a day or a year, although he obeyed his Lord from the moment he met Him. Even after such a bone-shattering conversion, it took Paul three years of retreat, of total focus, for him even to get a solid beginning toward integrating all he had known and learned and valued before His encounter with Jesus. It took him another fourteen years before Paul was ready publicly to proclaim the gospel and actively to build Christ's church [Galatians 1.] Don't compare; don't be discouraged if you don't feel it's happening for you as quickly or as dramatically as you'd like. Your conversion experience was not like Paul's and your path of growth will not be like Paul's. But it's the same risen Christ who has called you, who longs to know you more intimately and restore you more completely. The same risen Lord above, His same Spirit here below, responding to Paul's prayers and cries and tears; directing and encouraging Paul, who is responding to your prayers. He is *not* asking you to renounce your past, to be who you

are *not*—but to fulfill your past, to live into your potential, to become who you *are*. He is eagerly longing for you to become who God created you to be—minus the confusion, the indecision, the fear and false priorities, the aimlessness. God took Saul’s unique life-experience and temperament: his learning, his education in the Law, his wanderlust, his fire-breathing zeal—not to turn him into a lobotomized Mister Rogers—but to set him free, to put him to work, to turn him into the great Paul, the apostle!

It’s important that we see how God works within our lives. He changes our evaluation of things by addition, not subtraction. I’m afraid there’s misunderstanding here; if people think Jesus is out to cheat them or if people don’t know that “God is love,” they are apt to conclude that God re-arranges our lives by subtraction. I’ve got to quit drinking, quit swearing, quit reading books or hearing speakers that may challenge what I was taught or not be “Christian” enough, quit laughing at all the really funny jokes and quit hanging around all my really interesting friends—that is, get my life straightened out and keep it there. God will take everything away; then maybe I’ll get to know what life with Jesus is like. This is totally backward.

If we give Him half a chance (not a pretend chance, of course; not trying to act “religious” or give stuff up to impress God or others) He will take care of cleaning up our act. Oh, He will change us. But He does it by addition, by adding. If I get serious with Him and let go and cooperate and obey, He will eventually add new perspective, new friends, new self-control, new convictions—a new understanding of what’s worth laughing at, what’s worth working toward. You will choose to keep away from some of the former things. You will lose interest in what used to appear so all-consuming. You will gradually come to esteem, as Paul did, the “life hidden with God in Christ” even more than even the best of the things from before.

Remember Jesus’ parable of the Pearl of great price. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (Mt 13:45-46) This man is a pearl merchant, an expert. There’s no indication he’s lost his mind to make this transaction: instead, he knows exactly what he’s doing and he freely, gladly gives up everything, even his most prized possessions (and accomplishments and sources of pride) to make way for the New. To make way for the Christ. The new life is worth more than even all the best of the old. And we all get to experiment, in our own way and at our own pace, to learn with our lives that this is true. “Taste and see that the LORD is good...”

What overwhelms every earthly reward and challenge and achievement for Paul is “knowing Jesus.” How great is this gain, this Pearl, this “addition:” as if all the twinkling stars of the prior ways before Jesus are overwhelmed by the dawning light of the rising sun. The stars of solid achievement and accomplishment and association have their value—but Paul had known the Light of the Son. We needn’t try to add more stars to our lives: stars of good citizenship, good manners, good church attendance, good career advancement. These may be fine things—but they’re exactly the kinds of things the Son eclipses—when, as Paul allowed Him, He re-orders and re-energizes and re-directs us. All sorts of exciting things do begin to happen in our lives when we yield to the Holy Spirit of God—but these are all the effects. The cause, according to Paul, is that we “know Jesus.”

“Knowing Jesus” obviously implies a relationship. You cannot have a relationship with someone who is dead or not present. Jesus is alive—He was raised

from the dead—and His Spirit, as you all know, is present within us this moment, every moment. All this means that we do not have to create our new life, re-evaluate all our experience, our past, by ourselves. Our spiritual disciplines sharpen our skills for cooperating with the Spirit of God; we pray every day and study the Scriptures, and the rest—not to change our lives single-handedly but to practice and get more effective at allowing the living God to re-make each one of us just as he re-made Paul’s life. We keep gathering together for worship God each Sunday, whether we feel like it or not, to keep putting ourselves not in harm’s way but in mercy’s way; to keep making ourselves available, to keep our spirits and lives open to Him.

God created Paul; God gave Paul all his talents and enthusiasms and his personality; God knew what good plans he had for Paul; God knew what kind of assignment would bring Paul most fully alive in this lifetime; God also knew exactly where Paul would need some divine help along the Way to complement even his own great strengths: direction, clarity, patience, stalwart sisters and brothers in the faith to encourage him, angels to watch over him, even supernatural dreams and visions to guide him.

No telling what blessings God will send you along the Way. But the point is that you finish strong—not to become what Paul became, but what *you* have been divinely created and destined to become. The finish, the goal and end, is that Paul and you and I “become conformed to the image of his Son, in order that He might be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters.” [Romans 8:28]

We grow more and more, from the first moment of our conversion, into the image of Christ. That doesn’t mean we are all supposed to end up identical twins, or clones—of course not. Paul became more Paul as he became more fully alive in Christ. Your talents, your pleasures, your unique personality, your truest goals become fulfilled in Him. We only live as mere shadows of the women and men we were created to become apart from what allow God to convert, apart from what we offer to Him to keep on perfecting. The more He perfects us the more we grow to become like Jesus. Not in His unique personality, His particular mission, His earthly life—but in His obedience, His joy, His love, His glory.

Our faith is not the ancient Eastern assumption that we lose our individuality and eventually merge into some undifferentiated Cosmic Self—no—we become more and more specifically and individually ourselves. By the grace of God, ours is an eternal “becoming” as we follow where Jesus has led, thru the days of this lifetime and far beyond. In the end, as we also heard from Paul as he approached his earthly end, it’s all gain: “to live is Christ, to die is gain; whether we live or whether we die we belong to Christ Jesus, Lord both of the dead and of the living.” Dear sisters and brothers: thanks be to God, we belong to Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen

### **Philippians 3:4b-11**

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.