

5th Sunday, Lent, C

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A popular phrase sometimes describes certain people as having **“gotten religious.”** That usually means 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 throughout his writings, he drops one-sentence remarks that 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 overall passage is a carefully crafted 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 contains insight into Paul's life. 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 religious.”** 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 is not that at all. The experience that Paul describes is not as extreme or uncommon as we might suppose. Nor is it exclusively religious.

In this world, all kinds of things take hold of us. Some married couples here know what I mean. When you were very young, you began to hear, see, and learn about love. In your teens, you start experimenting with it 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 they move into the realm of which Paul spoke, where they take hold of us.

This is especially true regarding 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. We believe 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 have not become real until it has become that kind of experience.

Perhaps we should remind ourselves that sooner or later, something will take hold of every one of us.

By that, I mean that something possesses us at the very core of our being. Something becomes the dominant theme of our lives. Some would protest that thought, insisting they can go through life without 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 every one of us. Just look at life and see all 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. Some homemakers and business people make it through the day only with the aid of pills. 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.

Therefore, our theme has a certain urgency. 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 the scope and seriousness of the matter, we need to look once more at Paul's statement: **“Christ has grasped me.”**

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

No man is ever entirely free to truly be himself until Christ has grasped him. That kind of commitment opens the door to every high and holy experience 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, 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. Christ's magnificent ideas can master our ordinary minds. 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 mostly plain and simple men, much like us. They were ordinary people mastered by something extraordinary. And they stand today 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

whom Christ has grasped—the hope of the world has always been in them and still is.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

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; you are the only one who can change it. **Amen.**