

Corinthians 10:1-6

Recently, I saw a piece about how the death of Elvis Presley's twin brother was a factor that troubled him his whole life long. He was both fascinated and troubled by the fact that he lived and his brother didn't. His mama would comfort him by saying she didn't know why it had happened, but she knew that one day they would all be together again as family in heaven. I suppose that's all she could say. But it wasn't entirely satisfactory to Elvis. The person doing the piece said that it was possible that it was a contributing factor to Elvis's own inner struggles and even his drug use. Who knows for sure. Like-wise, "Ray"--the movie about Ray Charles--employed the traumatic event of his younger brother's accidental drowning--and Ray's helplessness to prevent it--as contributing to his own low self-esteem and desperate struggle with drugs. Hard family issues from youth--including the accidental death of his brother--were also played out in "Walk the Line," the wonderful film of Johnny Cash's life. Three great musicians, all with brothers who died, and the living one suffered because of it. We all know that factors in the past can dramatically affect us our whole lives long.

Life's circumstances can lead to certain kinds of thinking and actions. It's possible that the apostle Paul might have acted similarly after his conversion to Christ. Three times in the NT, he speaks of himself quite negatively in light of his previous attitudes and actions toward the early church before his Damascus Road encounter with Christ. In Galatians 1:13, he writes: "*You have heard...of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God, and was trying to destroy it.*" Indeed, the pre-Christian Paul was ruthless in his arrests and aided in the punishment and deaths of

early Christians (Acts 7, 9). In 1 Corinthians 15, when listing Christ's post-Resurrection appearances, Paul says: "*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God,*" (vss.8-9). And if that weren't enough, toward the end of his life, he writes, "*The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*"--and he adds-- "*of whom I am foremost,*" (1 Timothy 2:15).

Such statements are clearly an indication that what he had done in the past, he could not forget. It is not easy to forget the past. Sometimes we never can, and some things we should not. But the past--whether we believe certain things are of God, or our own doing, or the results of others--should not hold us down or reduce us to a crippled life. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12, some of our life's difficulties are meant to be op-opportunity for God's work in us and for the sake of others. And we need to see them that way. As he puts it, "*for whenever I am weak, then I am strong,*" (vs. 10). But more than that, we might ask how did Paul manage to escape the prison of the past to be of use of Christ in the present? Verses 4-5 of our passage today may be the clue: "*We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.*" This is a remarkable statement, but it also presents a strategy of the Christian life also, a strategy that the apostle Paul would say will serve us well as we seek to be obedient servants and friends of Christ. Here Paul means that this is something we should and must do. It's part of the action we are to take as followers of Christ. Yet, this is not a matter of theory. It's very practical.

You see, the same Paul that makes the sad-but-true statements about himself we have read follows them with these words. Of the first, he says, "*God... [Who] called me*

through his grace was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him... ”
(Gal 1:15). In the Corinthians passage, he follows with, *“But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain,”* (1 Cor 15:10). And in 1 Timothy, *“But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe...”* (1 Tim 2:16). From the dark past, Paul moved into the light.

By *“taking every thought captive to Christ,”*--that is, making himself and his mind serve Christ’s purposes--Paul gained a new motivation. Motivation is an extremely important aspect of our human existence, whether it be the motivation behind workers producing in a factory, motivation of a crime which the police detective must prove, the motivation of students to study, motivation of the Olympic athlete to be the best he or she can be, or just the prime motivation for living each our days. With the media all over us, we are confronted with the issues of motivation all the time: what was the real motive of such-and-such murder? What is the motive behind the super-rich like Bill Gates? What are the real motives of our politicians? And what are our motives day in and day out?

Clearly Paul had undergone a life-changing event, and he had learned to live out its implications. But he did so because he believed he had been given a new reason for his life, and his life’s motivation dramatically changed. Before, his motivation was his own religious zeal which motivated him to persecute the early church until he came face to face with his own Messiah. But after that encounter, he was motivated by the commission Christ gave him to minister the gospel--that is, to live “for Christ.” Paul explains, in a few words, what is the Christian’s motivation for living, words we have

recently considered in this letter: *“For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all...And he died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them,”* (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Sometimes, we call this response of living “for Christ” as obedience. That word tends to have negative overtones to our ears. Yet when we are committed to a cause or purpose, we are willingly obedient. If we think about it, in the workplace, on a sports team, or with a fitness guru, and many other situations, we are very often willingly obedient. Christian obedience is something like that. It is obedience to someone we trust, to whom we are grateful, to someone, in fact, we love. It is interesting that Jesus assumes his followers will love him. *“If you love me,” he says, “you will keep my commandments...No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you...and I have called you friends,”* (John 15:10, 13-15). This is how Paul understood his relationship to Jesus, an apostle yes, but a friend first. And we all commissioned from our baptisms to the gospel work, the “work of ministry,” as Paul has put in 2 Corinthians 5 as we considered last time. But first, we are Christ’s friends.

But then, if we have grasped--or better are grasped by--the ultimate motivation for our lives, what do we do with it? Christian living “for Christ” is to be manifested in all sorts of ways. I think that one of the weaknesses of many Christian people--and I include myself--is that we do not show to ourselves, as well as others around us--at least not enough--that we really do believe what we say. There is an old cliché: *“If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”* In a

world and culture that has so much bad news, so much deceit, pride, and discord, Christians above all--whenever it is possible--should be a positive people. Yes, even Presbyterians can be positive! There are plenty of people--for what reason I'm not sure--that like to dwell on the negative--always see things from the half-empty or worse point of view--people who make themselves not so desirable to be around. This was played out on SNL by "Downer Debbie," who no matter what, brought a strong note of negativity into the scene. Jesus certainly wasn't like that. His view--in spite of all he faced--was positive, living from the point of view that he knew and loved, "God our Father," who cares about each of us to the uttermost. To be positive--as Jesus was and as Paul learned and is speaking--here requires effort, and an effort often ignored by Christians. This required effort is a powerful and recurring theme Paul stresses. It is the effort of THINKING! It is this action of "*taking every thought captive to Christ,*"--that is setting oneself and the people and situations one faces in light of the reality of the Lordship and salvation of Jesus Christ--salvation here, meaning God's purpose to reconcile all things in Christ, and giving to us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:16-21).

First remember, "*The love of Christ controls us!*" (2 Cor 5:14). Then, realizing our personal situation is secure in God, we must THINK! Here he says, "*We des-troy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.*" In Romans 12:1-2, it's "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God*"--notice the grounding, God's mercies-- "*to present your bodies*"--your lives here in the flesh-- "*as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*"--and we are because of Christ Jesus-- "*Do not be conformed*

to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good, acceptable, and perfect.” In Colossians, he says, “So if you have been raised with Christ,”--and as believers you have--“seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at God’s right hand”--[He is Lord over all! That is], “Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things on earth.” Hear Eugene Peterson’s excellent rendering of this passage: “So if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don’t shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ--that’s where the action is. See things from his perspective.” That is spot on!

Again, it was not the past that drove or constrained Paul in the present. No, he practiced what he himself taught. A good example of that is when Paul--from a Roman prison situation--writes to his Philippian brothers and sisters, “Rejoice in the Lord al-ways; again I will say, Rejoice.” And then he follows those words with what it means. In other words, to live joyfully before the Lord doesn’t just mean shouting happy platitudes. In fact, it may not mean that ever. It means living Christ-like toward others. What does a “rejoicing life” look like? He says very plainly: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God....whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things,” (Phil 4:4-6).

What Paul wants us to do is to live the Lordship of Christ in very practical and

positive, up-building ways. Too often we let the conventions of the day, the attitudes that are typical and all around us--even understandable--motivate us. The Christian is to think and act differently, and as reason to do so. George Herbert, 17th century English poet, wrote these verses (from "*The Elixir*," 1633):

*Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see;
And what I do in anything
To do it all for thee.*

*All may of thee partake,
Nothing can be so mean {insignificant}
Which, with this tincture, 'for thy sake'
Will not grow bright and clean.*

*A servant with this [take]
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for thy sake
Makes that and the action fine.*

Now, one may hear that poem and find it quaint, but Herbert is making a significant point. He understood that our witness to Christ--both for others and to ourselves--is not just a matter of being nice. It's not just a matter of "*practicing random acts of kind-ness*,"--though that's good, too. It's THE matter of taking Christ's Lordship seriously, intentionally, creatively into all the avenues of our lives. Too many Christians have for far too long considered salvation as something to come. But it is first--and necessarily--something now. It is about what God in Christ is doing through us for and to the whole world. It is to be lived out NOW, daily, and ongoing. As Herbert put it, "*Teach me, my God and King, In all things thee to see; And what I do in anything, To do it all for thee.*"

I know of no better example of this being put into practice than by Mother Teresa, now deceased 15 years or so. She was a 19 year-old Albanian Roman Catholic nun.

She left her home country and went to India in 1929. In 1950, she left her convent in Calcutta in order to establish a ministry to the poorest of the poor and destitute. She called her order the Missionaries of Charity. This single, frail woman in a white sari, described as “well-scrubbed dynamo,” began to bring food to the starving, clothes to the destitute, medicines to the sick, compassionate care to the leprous and those thrown into the streets, and a comfortable and clean bed for the dying. What is her motivation?

In the main house of the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, on a wall are written these words: *“Let each sister see Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. The more repugnant the work or the person, the greater also must be her faith, love, and cheerful devotion in ministering to our Lord in this distressing disguise.”* In another place, she wrote: *“I see Christ in every person I touch, because he has said, ‘I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison. It is as simple as that.’”* That is “*setting one’s mind on the things above,*” as Paul said. And to look at people from a different perspective, from the perspective of Christ as Lord, “*no longer from a human point of view,*” (2 Cor 5:16). Is it easy? No, of course not. Mother Teresa didn’t find it easy either. That is reflected in a writing accredited to her, “*Do It Anyway*”:

People are often unreasonable,
illogical and self-centered;
Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind,
people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.
If you are successful,
you will win some false friends and true enemies;
Succeed anyway.
If you are honest and frank,
people may cheat you;
Be honest anyway.
What you spend years building,
someone could destroy overnight;

Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness,
they may be jealous;

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today,
people will often forget tomorrow;

Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have,
and it may never be enough;

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis,
it is between you and God;

It was never between you and them anyway.

Only if you believe certain things, can that make any sense. And only if you take the effort to think such things through, "*taking every thought captive to Christ,*" can you see the beauty of it. And begin to grasp for the life, the "abundant life," Christ intends for us. Amen.