

The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

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The Church of Jesus the Good Shepherd

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He is my hero. It is the one thing that hasn't changed as I grew older. It is the one thing that hasn't changed since I became a man and put childish things behind me. It is the one thing that did not change as I journeyed across the Tiber from the Baptist Church to the Church of Rome. It is the one thing that hasn't changed as I grew in wisdom and strength. It is one of the few things that did not change as through the imposition of hands and the descent of the Holy Spirit I became a priest of the Most High God. I can remember my Sunday School teachers, Mrs. Jack and Mr. Ken, describing him with reverence and awe. I can remember Mrs. Helen speaking of his missionary journeys and all the many hardships he endured for Christ. I can remember my Seminary professors lauding him as a champion of the faith. Whether you are Baptist or Methodist, Episcopalian or Catholic, Lutheran or Church of Christ he is one of the few Saints who is revered equally. He has been

my hero all my life and he will be until I meet him one day in that heavenly city. I am of course speaking of St. Paul or Saul of Tarsus, the Apostle to the Gentiles. He stands out boldly in the communion of Saints as one of those giants who changed the world. He changed the world because of his deep and abiding faith and because of his powerful rhetoric on behalf of Christ and His Church.

He refers to himself as the least of the Apostles and yet his legacy echoes down through the centuries. He is the author of nearly half of the New Testament and his writing and preaching helped to change the world. He did it by handing on, not only to those early Christians but also to all of us who, what he received from Christ. He handed it on with a passionate belief in its truth. And what did He hand on. He handed on what we profess every Sunday that the Church gathers. He handed on the Good News that is Jesus Christ. He handed on the most important aspect of our faith which is that Christ died for our sins, was buried and was raised on the third day. This is the cornerstone of our

faith. Every thing else is merely a by product of that message and if we are to understand God's love for us, if we are to appreciate His mercy and be receptive to His grace then this is what we should believe. That he loved us, that he died for us and that He rose from grave victorious to free us from the double bondage of sin and death.

What better witness can we have than St. Paul. He willingly tells us that he was a persecutor of the Church. His story is legendary as he breathed a fire of hatred and went to any length to destroy this sect of followers of Jesus Christ. But then an amazing thing occurred as he went forth breathing his righteous fury he encountered the Lord. On a country road to Damascus Saul's entire life was changed. The Lord called to him and he was struck down on that road. He was struck down and blinded. But he rose up from that ditch a new man and in humility he was led to Damascus where not only his sight was restored but his very way of life was changed. He was changed because he was open to God. He was changed because he was

receptive to God's grace. He was changed by an encounter with Christ and as a result he changed the world. He was humble enough to recognize his own faults and failings and made difference in the world.

But then people who truly seek God and are willing to serve Him unreservedly are called to recognize their faults and failings. Because it is in recognizing our own faults that we are able to truly humble ourselves to follow the will of God. We are given an example of that in the prophet Isaiah. Here was a man who received a great vision of God. He saw the God in all His majestic glory seated upon His throne being attended by the Seraphim. At the sight of God's glory Isaiah was overwhelmed and recognized that He was unworthy of the Lord. He said, "I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips." In this moment he was as humbled as St. Paul was on the road to Damascus because he too had encountered the Lord in all His glory. Isaiah like Paul was overwhelmed and Isaiah like Paul received the immeasurable grace of God. By touching his lips with an ember from

the altar of God He was cleansed of his wickedness and purged of his sin. Then since He was receptive to the grace of God he was willing to fulfill a great commission to go out and prophesy about the promises of God. His prophecies still bring hope to the hopeless and remind us all of God's love, mercy and forgiveness. Since He was humble enough to recognize his faults and failings Isaiah was able to make a difference in the world.

Simon, that impetuous fisherman, the brash radical who always spoke before he thought is another example of how an encounter with our Blessed Lord changes lives. Simon Peter had been fishing all night and day with no luck. He had been fishing his entire life. He knew all about fishing, he was an expert. Then Jesus was in his boat and he told him what to do. Simon Peter decided to humor him and with a sarcastic tone in his voice he said, "But at your command I will lower my nets." Then they caught this great amount of fish. It was so great that they needed help to gather them in. It was in this moment that Peter was

overwhelmed at who he was encountering and was filled with a sense of unworthiness. He begged the Lord to depart from him because of His sinfulness. But the Lord had other plans and instead called him to be a fisher of men. And Peter being open to the grace of God followed him and was humble enough to recognize his faults and failings and was able to make a difference in the world.

My brothers and sisters, Peter and Paul would give up everything for the sake of this Jesus that they encountered. They gave him their minds, their bodies, their feet and hands and their voices and they changed the world. Through their work for the sake of the Name they changed the world. Ultimately both of them would give up their lives and their legacy would live on. Encouraged by their witness countless men and women down through the centuries have encountered Jesus Christ and still encounter Him today. Because of their tireless effort a Galilean fisherman and Jewish tentmaker are revered and honored around the world not because they had wealth or fame. Not because

they were learned or eloquent. Not even because they were the most popular folks around. They are revered and honored because they recognized their faults and failures, because they were humble, because they were willing to give their lives to Christ in a radical way. Because they were willing to be receptive to God's grace after they had encountered His Son. Everyone gathered in this place is about to encounter the risen Lord in a unique and intimate way. We will come forward to the altar of God and receive from this altar His body and blood. Allow his grace to work within you. Allow his grace to change your lives. Allow him to lead you where you do not want to go and in so doing you will be able to make a difference in the world.