

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B) *The Rev. Peter C. Jacobson, STS*
 Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Cor 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20 Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
 January 22, 2012 Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

There is a theme that runs through our Second Reading and our Gospel this Sunday. It's a theme that stands at the very heart of Christian discipleship. To express it in one word, you might call it "***detachment.***" There is a shift in consciousness, a shift in orientation, that is essential to Christianity — conversion — if you will — a change of heart. It's a shift from a "world-centered" perspective to a "***God-centered***" perspective. And this shift — this conversion — involves at a very fundamental level, a "letting go" of any and all of the things of this world as decisive to one's happiness, ***and*** a resolute ***clinging to God alone.***

I know I've quoted before St. Augustine's great line, "*Lord you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest you.*" The deepest hunger of our hearts, corresponds to that good which is ***God alone.*** And when we attach that desire to anything less than God, we set ourselves up for great spiritual frustration.

St. John of the Cross was a 16th century Spanish mystic and poet. He wrote this about what an attachment is: "*That's anything in this world,*

including your own life, that you're convinced you cannot live without." Let those words sink in. An attachment is anything in this world — sex, money, pleasure, power, fame — including your own life — that you are convinced you cannot live without. The baptized child of God is someone called to let go of any and all of those things, ***clinging to God alone***.

This theme of detachment from the world and attachment to God is forcefully proclaimed by St. Paul in our Second Reading from his first letter to the Corinthians. It's enough to take your breath away. Listen again:

*From now on, let those who have wives
live as though they had none,
and those who mourn as though they were not mourning,
and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing,
and those who buy as though they had no goods,
and those who deal with the world
as though they had no dealings with it.*

Now that's radical! What can Paul possibly mean?

He means this: Relationships — even the most intense, those between husbands and wives — feelings, even the strongest, good and bad — material things, the world itself — ***all of these*** should be, at a basic level, ***let go of***. Now mind you, ***not*** in the literal sense. But if I can put it this way, in the "attitudinal" sense — ***as though***, or ***as if***, they were not important. So Paul is not saying to men, "get rid of your wives." He's not saying to women, "dump your husbands." But rather, to live ***as though***,

even those strongest and most intense relationships were not all-defining, or not themselves the source of your deepest joy. Paul is not telling buyers and sellers to abandon their worldly goods. But he is telling them not to make their worldly goods and their worldly work **all-important**. Paul is not telling sad people not to be sad, happy people not to be happy. But he is saying, do not to think that these worldly emotions — good or bad — are all-determining, all-defining. St. Paul is saying, let go of this world and everything in it. Refocus your whole life, on **God alone**.

And why? Because, Paul says, *“the form of this world is passing away.”* St. Paul was so overwhelmed on the road to Damascus, he was so overwhelmed by the risen Christ, by the fact of the Resurrection, that **everything** in this world was **relativized**. God’s love and purpose, revealed in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, causes this world in its entirety to fade into **relative** insignificance. Not absolute or complete insignificance, but **relative** insignificance. Everything — even the best things in this world — are now relativized, in light of the overwhelming good that is revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Elsewhere, in his letter to the Philippians, “St. Paul writes: *“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain”* (1:21), and again: *“I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content...in any and all circumstances I have*

learned the secret of facing plenty and want" (4:11, 12b). Knowing the resurrection of Jesus, Paul's heart was detached from the world, and attached to God. That's why the disciple can say, "Lord whether I've got a long life or a short life, I don't care, as long as I am serving you. Lord, whether I'm rich or poor, I don't care, as long as I'm serving you. Lord, whether I'm healthy or sick — that's a matter of indifference to me, as long as my health can serve you, or my sickness can serve you." That's Christian detachment. That's living ***as though*** the things of this world do not ultimately matter.

This past Monday we marked the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., and he gave an excellent example of this attitude in the speech he gave the night before he was assassinated. King was at a gathering in Memphis, and he wasn't scheduled to speak. But he came at the last minute, and he did speak. Here's a snippet of what he said,

*Like everyone, I'd like to have a long life,
longevity has its place.
But I don't care about that now.
All I want to do is God's will.*

The long life — life itself — became for him at that moment, a matter of ***indifference***. As long as he was doing ***God's*** will, it didn't matter whether he had a long or a short life. And then King said this:

I'm not fearing any man.

*I've been to the mountaintop.
 Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

I'm not afraid. You see, the spiritual payoff of detachment is, the conquest of fear. When you're detached from the world and attached to Christ, well, you don't have anything to fear. When you don't cling to things of this world, then you're not terrified of losing them. King could say — echoing the words of St. John of the Cross — even my own life is not something I'm clinging to." That's the attitude of a disciple. That's what St. Paul is talking about.

Look also at today's Gospel. It is Jesus' inaugural address, his first words St. Mark's Gospel. He announces:

*The time is fulfilled,
 and the kingdom of God is at hand;
 repent, and believe in the Gospel.*

The time is fulfilled — Christ, the Messiah, has arrived — divinity and humanity have met. God's love, his grace, his forgiveness and mercy, have broken through definitively into our world. So, now, what must we do? Jesus says "repent" — in Greek: "*metanoiete*." To repent can be to change your behavior, but it goes **deeper** than that. It means: Change your **mind**. Change your **attitude**. Change your **way of seeing**. Change your **way of perceiving**. Change your **way of thinking**. You need to look at the world in a radically renewed way. And it results in St. Paul's

admonition — to have the attitude of detachment. Money, success, fame, power, pleasure — they are **not** ultimate goods. Your own life in this world is not something to be clung to fearfully and tenaciously. Indeed, compared to the in-rushing of God's grace made available in Jesus Christ, all of that is **as nothing**. I can let go of it. I can abandon it, because of **Christ**.

Immediately after giving this announcement, Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John — fishermen. They're washing and drying their nets. And they leave **everything** behind — livelihood, family, worldly hopes, whatever ambitions they had — they leave it all behind and follow Jesus.

The church fathers comment here that the nets are symbolic of all the ways these men are tied to this world. They leave their nets behind — leave father, family, livelihood behind. How are they able to do it? Because they've undergone a conversion, this "*metanoia*," this repentance, this change of mind, in the presence of the **overwhelming grace** of Jesus. They detach from the world. They attach to Christ.

And there is genuine freedom that comes from such detachment — true liberty. St. Paul says it's for **freedom** that Christ has set you free — that's what he means. Set free **from** your attachments to this world, you

can now freely move where you are called to move. You can go wherever God is calling you to go.

God alone matters — Christ alone. God alone is the good sought by each and every one of our hearts. And once you know that in your bones, in your soul, in your heart, then you can let go of anything, even your own life. And in that you find true evangelical freedom.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Credits: Robert Barron

