



WELS Prison Ministry Sunday

Pentecost 5B

Worship Planning

Hymn suggestions: CW490/494, 539, 536, 533

Psalm suggestion: 47

Prayer of the Day: Conversion of St. Paul/Evangelism/Social Concern

General Prayer: Litany 2: For the Church

Example Sermon

Epistle Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:16,17

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Theme: A Real Eye-Opener

- 1) Paul's
 - a) A shameful recollection Vs. 16b
 - b) A shocking transition Vs. 16c
- 2) Ours
 - a) To live new lives Vs. 17
 - b) To see others as new Vs. 16a

I have a fear of spiders. I'm confident that fear was passed down to me from my mother. She would cringe if she saw a spider on the TV (part of a program) even though it was not at all close and entirely incapable of touching her. So when, lately, I saw a gigantic (It was gigantic!) arachnid scurry across my white bed sheet, I tried my level best to kill it. I failed. My wife calmly announced that it was more scared of me than I of it. Oh, how I wished that to be true.

So I did a little internet research. I searched for what spiders are good for. Here's what I found. "Spiders feed on common indoor pests, such as roaches, earwigs, mosquitoes, flies and clothes moths. If left alone, they will consume most of the insects in your home, providing effective home pest control." This follow-up question appeared. "Should I kill house spiders?" The answer? "So killing a spider doesn't just cost the arachnid its life, it may take an important predator out of your home. It's natural to fear spiders. They have lots of legs and almost all are venomous—though the majority of species have venom too weak to cause issues in humans, if their fangs can pierce our skin at all." This has provided

me a new view of spiders, perhaps a positive enough view that I won't immediately squish the next one I see.

I just announced to you my fear of spiders. I could have just as easily referred to it as my hatred of spiders. Did you catch what the apostle Paul admits, was inspired to admit? He once had a worldly view of Jesus. Paul wasn't always an apostle. He wasn't always a Christian. He wasn't always Paul. There was a time, perhaps most of his life, that he hated Jesus. He felt the only good Jesus is a dead Jesus. Known then as Saul, he made it his mission to kill the memory of Jesus even if that meant going from house to house to squish those who trusted in Jesus as THE way to forgiveness and heaven.

It seems impossible that Paul's eyes could be so clouded to the truth about Jesus. Hear Paul's own confession that had to bring him great shame. "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them (Acts 26:9-11)."

All this time Saul thought he was eradicating a memory. He was shocked to discover as he approached one of those foreign cities, Damascus, that Jesus was far more than a memory. Jesus was alive, alive again! He was real. Saul heard his voice with a message directed at him personally. He was powerful—enough to stop him in his tracks, enough to have sent death packing. Most applicable to our message today, Jesus was powerful enough to entirely change Paul's view of him. This man who was obsessed with wiping out his name was now obsessed with proclaiming his name. By his own admittance, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ . . . I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Phil. 3:7,8)." This man who was convinced he had to oppose Jesus was now "convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38,39)."

Paul admits something further here. He calls each of us out as guilty of the same worldly view of Jesus that he once had. Thank God the Holy Spirit that the majority of us had to suffer this false view of Jesus for only days or weeks. The Holy Spirit healed us of this view before we could do much damage. What the Holy Spirit did for Paul and in Paul on a road to Damascus, he did for and in each of us at our baptism. The opposite of a worldly point of view is a spiritual point of view. In baptism, the Holy Spirit fit us with new lenses that enables us to see Jesus as the Son of God and Savior that alone squished death and provides us life here and hereafter.

In that moment outside of Damascus, it was all too clear to Saul that Jesus could have squished him—slapped him with the eternal punishment he had earned and deserved. Jesus didn't squish him. He picked him up from the dust and gently called him into his kingdom by water and the Word. He gave Paul a new lease on life, and Paul was determined not to do the same thing all over again. Paul was no longer interested in living for himself but for him who died for him and was raised again.

What the Holy Spirit reveals to you and me today through Paul is that this is how things always work in his kingdom. *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* Can this be as much an eye opener for us today as Paul was given on his Damascus road? No one has done more for us than Jesus. We repeat again and again what he did for us. *“He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.”* No one has accomplished more for us than Jesus. We trust he provides us *“the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”* It’s our opened eyes that prompted us to come to worship today. Our opened eyes fixed on Jesus anticipate how throughout this coming week we might *“offer (our) bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God . . . (our) spiritual act of worship.”*

This is a biblical truth. *“If ANYONE is in Christ, he/she is a new creation.”* How many examples of this truth are demonstrated for us in Scripture? How clearly this occurs in Zacchaeus! That wee little tax collector stopped being his old thieving self and became a newly generous benefactor. *“Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”* I wonder how long it took for his fellow Christians to stop being nervous around him, to start doing business with him again. How confident were they that Jesus who had changed them had also changed Zacchaeus?

Could the thief on the cross serve as another example? *“If ANYONE is in Christ, he is a new creation.”* This incarcerated man on death row initially mocked Jesus. What an eye-opening transition occurred in him! He stopped mocking Jesus. He defended Jesus. He willingly confessed he deserved the sentence he was suffering. He was brought to trust in Christ there was more to come after his death. Jesus embraced this child of God with his promise spoken to him personally, *“Today you will be with me in paradise.”* That felon is in heaven today. He will be there when we arrive. Will we be glad to make his acquaintance? Silly thought? I pray so! The fact that he is in heaven means we no longer regard him from a worldly point of view.

Your church body’s Prison Ministry Committee wants to assure you that the change Jesus prompted in the thief on the cross, in wee Zacchaeus, in Paul, in you and me, is one he is accomplishing in men and women in jail and prisons throughout our country. We don’t want you to miss out on being a blessing to them or being blessed by them. Here’s how a few of them have blessed us through correspondence after working through our Bible lessons, enjoying a WELS provided pen pal, or receiving visits by a trained visitor. *(Choose from inmate quotes below. Pick and choose which quotes you wish to use to the extent you wish to use them.)* Not only are the inmates blessed, but those that bring the gospel to them are blessed as well. Listen to these comments by our volunteers. *(Choose from volunteer quotes below. Pick and choose which quotes you wish to use to the extent you wish to use them.)*

Praise Jesus! We have not been, and we are assured we will not be, squished by God our judge as we deserve. In Christ we are saved and flourish. Let’s not be easily tempted to squish from our minds and from our ministries those who are or were behind bars. Pray for them. Pray the Lord enable you to be a blessing to them. Jesus can answer your prayers by having them be a blessing to you just as he has this very day. Amen.

Quotations for possible use:

Inmates

I will never, ever forget all the years that you all have been by my side helping me in this very difficult time. I don't know any of you, but I can honestly say that I love you all! May the Lord bless you all now and forever. – José

Thank you for serving the Lord! Thank you especially for the Easter card. Little things like that mean the world to us, that extra step in showing God's love. Because why else would a stranger send me a personal card? Because God loves me and is using you to show it. Our God is and awesome God! Thanks again. – Mark

If you hadn't come to the jail, I wouldn't be coming to church now. – Former inmate in Florida

Prison Ministry Volunteers:

I have benefitted in many ways—learning about prison life and all its deficiencies, studying God's message so I could pass it on to these souls, and realizing how richly I have been blessed, and knowing that “there but for the grace of God go I.” – Pen pal to inmate

The next week we went through the story and came to the question that read, “Have you ever run away from God the way Jonah did?” [The inmate] answered yes and I asked him to tell about it, expecting to hear a little about what landed him jail. Instead, he told me how he used to see me coming and knew that I would talk to him about God's Word, so he pulled his blanket over his head and pretended he was sleeping. That was his way of running away from the Lord. We both had a good laugh and then he assured me that he is not running any longer. – Jail visitor in Texas

...most of the inmates either entered the room crying or left the room crying. Sometimes they did both. They had tears of guilt and despair entering the room. They had tears of joy and relief from their Savior's forgiveness leaving the room. They are HUNGRY for God's Word. – Prison visitor in South Dakota

It's the handshakes followed by "thank you so much for being here" and being asked "when will you be back" at the end of Bible study that stands out. It's the many different expressions on the faces of the men that tell the story. Joy. Comfort. Relief. Understanding. Thankfulness. – Jail visitor in Minnesota