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“The Blessing of the Ordinary”

Text: Acts 9:1-22; Matthew 19:27-30 (Galatians 1:11-24)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Don't underestimate the ordinary.

That probably sounds like a strange thing to say we commemorate the Conversion of St. Paul, which is by all measures spectacular. The great persecutor of the church is changed into that very church's greatest missionary. He is struck down on his way to Damascus to arrest and imprison Christians when he himself is imprisoned in blindness for three days. The Christians he has come to hurt take care of him as he stays with them and regains his sight and strength and is baptized. Everything about this story is amazing and spectacular.

And we like that. We want stuff like that. We like the fireworks, the awards, the recognition, the dazzle and awe. And always bigger and better. And while there's nothing wrong with that, there is a danger with that. Because it's easy to get caught up in the spectacular and miss - or devalue - the ordinary. But it is the ordinary that is more a part of our lives, and maybe the more important part.

For example: **weddings**. We like our weddings to be special and large, with lots of friends and tradition. And in comparison, the married life that comes after that can seem quite ordinary. Or **graduations**. There are caps and gowns and awards, pictures and gifts and congratulations. But then you have to go to work and use that education, and that can seem quite mundane. Or this week there was the **March for Life** - all those people, marching together, singing, joyful to speak for the sanctity of life and for those who cannot speak for themselves. But then there are the other 364 days of the year to defend life and help mothers and the effort to change hearts and minds. And that's hard work.

But not only is the ordinary longer and more usual than the momentary and spectacular times in our lives, the ordinary is where the greater blessing is found. For, it seems to me, the spectacular is more for me; but the ordinary is more for others.

So think of the three examples I just mentioned. The one, spectacular day of your wedding is not the greatest blessing - it is you and your spouse loving and serving and laying down your lives for one another and for your children, blessing and being blessed in countless ways. And when you graduate, the greatest blessing is not in the conferring of a diploma or a degree, but in your serving your neighbor in your work, helping them and providing for others what they need. And as great as hundreds of thousands of people marching through the streets of DC is, the even greater blessing is when a mother sees

her unborn child for the very first time on an ultrasound picture and decides against aborting that life, or when you visit someone in a nursing home and lend a hand and they know they haven't been forgotten.

But if the spectacular is what we're all about, what we want, what we expect, then we not only lose all that, but that's why so many marriages fail, our work turns into drudgery, and so many give up and lose hope. The ordinary can't live up to the spectacular. And it's the blindness to the blessing in the ordinary that is one of satan's most effective tools these days.

So we hear about the Conversion of St. Paul, *and we want that*. We want God to do that for everyone. If He would just come and appear as the spectacular God He is, then everyone would believe. Our friends and family who don't believe, those ISIS guys who are beheading and blowing up everyone . . . maybe it would even be easier for you to believe.

Well we're not the first to think that way. Lots of folks in the Bible wanted Jesus to do the spectacular. King Herod wanted to see Jesus do some miracles, the disciples asked Jesus if they should call down lightning from heaven on their opponents, and they wanted Jesus to make them the greatest. But you know what they got instead? The cross. A whipped and bloody and then lifeless Jesus tossed in a grave. Great.

But as you know, it really was great. Not because of the cross itself - that was quite ordinary at the time. The Romans were crucifying lots of folks. But because of who that was on it. Not just Jesus of Nazareth, but the almighty God in human flesh, dying. Dying to pay the price for our sins. Dying to give us the hope of living. Dying so that when we're dying, we know we're not alone and we have a God greater than death - a God who raises the dead.

Which is pretty spectacular! But not now - in the end, on the Last Day it will be. But now all we see are graves covered over with dirt after our loved ones are tossed in there. All we see now are people growing old and wearing out. All we see now is telling us that death has won and we have lost. . . . *If* we've been blinded to the blessing in the ordinary.

Because there is our hope. For the water of baptism looks ordinary and powerless to those who have been so blinded and are looking for something spectacular. But there in that ordinary place and in that ordinary way is where you and I have met Jesus and where we were raised from the dead with Him. A resurrection and life that will come to its fulfillment and completion on the Last Day, when our bodies are raised and glorified, but a new life that is yours already now. Though it still looks quite ordinary. But you're not. You're now a child of God. Like Paul. After all the spectacular happened to him, remember what happened next? He was baptized and he started to live a new life.

And was that new life spectacular? We usually think it was or assume it was. It certainly got off to a spectacular start. But the rest of Paul's life was pretty unspectacular. In fact, it was pretty bleak. Yes, he was the church's greatest missionary, but I wonder if you lived back then if you would really have known that. He was followed and hounded by those who disagreed with him, he was persecuted and whipped and stoned, he was arrested and spent a lot of years in jail. Which is what Jesus told Ananias: ***I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.***

Suffer, not spectacular. The cross. Jesus. Paul. What about you?

We heard words about you today. The first two readings were all about Paul and his conversion - that's what we're commemorating today, after all. But the Holy Gospel had some words for you. ***And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.***

What do you think of those words? On the one hand, I've heard folks talk of them in some spectacular ways, saying they're going to leave their family and all they have behind and go to Africa and be a missionary! But on the other hand, doesn't the Fourth Commandment tell us to *do* the ordinary, to *honor* our father and mother? And aren't we supposed to take care of our families? So which is it?

Well, certainly some are called to be missionaries. Two families from our church, former members, recently have and we'll be supporting them. Paul was such a missionary. But if you're doing it to be spectacular, to receive a hundredfold and get eternal life, then (it seems to me) you're doing it for your own name's sake, not for His name's sake. But missionaries are not just those who go overseas. Our own neighborhoods and houses are filled with people who need to be taught and cared for.

The key is the word that is used here for *leaving*. It's a word that is often used for what your heart does. It means *to let go of*, and although you don't realize it, is a word most of you pray everyday . . . in the Lord's Prayer. It is the word *forgive*. Because to forgive is to let go of someone's sin and not hold it against them. It is what Jesus has done for you - you are forgiven because Jesus would not let go of your sin, so that His Father would hold your sin against Him and not against you. And so Jesus was the first who became last, so that we who are last might be first.

If you put that understanding in this verse, it brings quite a new perspective. It's about what your heart is clinging to. Is your heart is clinging to others' sins, or letting them go in forgiveness? Is your heart clinging to houses and lands and the things of the world, or to Christ? . . . We *want* these verses to be about us, but the truth? It's hard to let go. Sometimes very hard.

But what you cannot do, Jesus has done for you. He is the One who did leave everything for you, and gave everything for you, who became dead last for you. That you may have what you do not deserve - blessings in this life and the next. *More* than a hundredfold more than you deserve here, and even more in eternal life. That's for you. Jesus for you.

And when you know that, you let go of one more thing: *yourself*. That's what happened to Paul. What he was didn't matter anymore. Dying or living, suffering or preaching, in jail or out of jail, didn't matter anymore. He didn't have to hang on to who He was because Jesus was hanging on to Him. And so he was free to live a new life leaving houses and brothers and sisters and father and mother and children and lands *and at the same time* serving them. Where God put Him and used Him.

And so too you. Your life may look by all measures quite ordinary - but don't underestimate the ordinary. Like Paul, God has called you and put you where you are and is using you where you are to do quite spectacular things. Forgiving, serving, helping, loving, leaving and serving, letting go of yourself because Jesus will never let go of you. And He is providing for you more than you could ever grab for yourself. For what you grab for here will not last; but what He gives you will last forever.

And if that can be true for someone like Saul, then who among us is beyond the reach of Christ Jesus? Who among us is not worth serving and loving and forgiving?

Sometimes the most spectacular things come in the most ordinary ways.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.