

A Methodist minister asked a member of his church why he did not come to church. He said it was because he had no good clothes and was ashamed to come to sit amongst those who were well-dressed.

The preacher bought the man new clothes, but still, the next Sunday, he did not show up to church. After the morning worship service, this caring preacher went to visit the man. The man sat on the porch swing all dressed up in his fancy clothes.

“What happened? I was expecting you to come to church.”

“When I got all dressed up in these fancy outfits, I found myself to be very different. I looked so well-off and prosperous that I went to the Episcopal church.” (Emphasis, Jan/Feb, 2009, p.53)

Well, it is just a story that I read from a magazine. And it reminds us of who we are as humans.

It is in our human nature that we want to show up or pretend to be something we are not; it is in our DNA that we think our status is decided by how we look or what we wear or where we live, and so on.

That is the culture we live in; those are the values we learned when we were very young; like it or not, it is the way it has been for a long time; and it is not going to change as long as humans live on the planet.

In this respect, the messages we hear from the Bible become

so different and radical that even though this is not the first time we hear them we kind of become surprised and even alarmed whenever we hear them.

St. Paul is the great example whose message not only opens our eyes always but also makes me wonder how a human being like him could do what he did.

We know Paul was not a perfect man; he was a human being just like you and me; in a way, to me, the best part of his story is the one of him fighting with his colleague Barnabas.

If you read Acts 15:36-39, Paul had a severe argument with Barnabas and eventually parted company with him. The issue they had was not about something theological; in other words, they did not fight because there was a difference in their understanding of faith.

The issue was rather personal: Barnabas wanted to take a fellow named Mark with them on their trip whereas Paul did not like the idea because he thought Mark had deserted from their previous mission trip.

The point is, Paul was also a man of flaw; keeping relationships with fellow Christians was not easy for him as it is true for all of us. But he was still a man of God; the Bible does not say that God stopped loving Paul because of his mistakes.

As a matter of fact, God's love for him was never changing; no, it was the opposite; God's love was even stronger for him

when he failed; God gave him more strength when he was weak; "where sin increased," says Paul, "grace abounded all the more." (Romans 5:20)

That is the love of God; that is the love of God Paul received and that's the love of God we can have even here and now.

Because of such overflowing love he felt in his heart, Paul said: all the things he once thought were so important were not important to him; they were all gone from his life. The education he had, the status as a Roman citizen, the family background as a Pharisee: all meant nothing to him compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master. He said he had dumped it all in the trash. (Phil 3:7)

No wonder Paul says today in our text: "Even though I am a free man, I have made myself a slave to all." In other words, he said:

"I don't care what other people say about me. I just want to be whatever if that helps me help people to know about the love of God I have. I want to be anything and I want to do anything if I could lead someone to Christ!

Whatever it takes, I will do it.

Whatever it takes, I will go anywhere.

If that saves a soul!

If that brings a person to life!

If that helps a person to know God!

If that helps a person to accept Christ!

Whatever it takes, I will do it!

Then, what happened? Where did he get all this passion and energy?

It was from the Spirit of God; it was from the risen Christ he met; it was from the living God who was always with him.

And here is a question. "How do we keep up the faith?" How do we maintain the energy?"

Sure, just like everything else, there may be ups and downs in our faith too. But it is only us that changes; God never changes his love for us.

Whenever we feel down, whenever we are exhausted, whenever our hearts are filled with concerns and worries for my own, we should come before God and commit ourselves to the Spirit so that He can come into us, dwell within us, and renew us.

There was an auction to raise money for a church mission. People brought whatever they could find at home; there were clothes, dishes, bits and pieces of furniture, and many more valuable items.

The sale went very well. They made lot of money. And at the end of the sale, someone brought an old violin covered with dust and stains. It had obviously been in the back of someone's garage for years.

"What am I bid for this?" asked the auctioneer, holding it up.

Well, nobody was interested in it. "Come on," he said, "say Something." Finally someone yelled out, "fifty cents", and everyone laughed. Then, from the back, an old man, whom no one knew, came to the front and asked to see the violin.

He took it into his arms and began to play it. Beautiful sound filled the room and touched everyone's heart. When he finished, he handed the violin back to the man and walked away.

"What am I bid?" the man called out again. "\$200! \$300! \$400!" and so the bids went on.

Dusty, dirty, old, it was worth only fifty cents. But when it was played by a master, then it was worth hundreds of dollars.

God wants to use us.

Don't say we are not worth anything; God sees us differently.

Let us allow ourselves to be played by our master.

(<http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/b-or05su.php>, accessed on 2/7/09)

Isaiah says "even the youth will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles."

The love of God never changes; we cannot afford to lose or miss this love. Whatever it takes, you and I have to have that love and we have to use it for God and His people. Amen.