

Proper 22 Year A—Philippians 3:4b-14
Sermon by Sister Eleanor Francis, CSJB

In the days of the American Westward Movement, sometimes families would start out from the eastern part of the country in their covered wagons hoping to go to California or Oregon. They would get as far as the Rocky Mountains and find themselves in trouble. The wagons were too heavy for the horses to make it up the narrow, winding mountain trails. Snow may have even begun to fall. The leader would say, “We’re going to have to unburden some of the wagons.” Families had to make difficult decisions about how to lighten the load. Furniture, chests of precious things, family pianos all ended up in the ravine. All these precious things had to be given up for the sake of a dream—a dream of a fresh start in a new place.

Back in 1999, when I was on vacation in San Francisco, I went to a lecture by Don Riso and Russ Hudson. Riso and Hudson were considered two of the top experts in the Enneagram and I suppose they still are. They had an approach to the Enneagram that was different from any I had previously run across. They described each of the nine types as an attempt to manifest some aspect of divinity. The ONE’s are trying to manifest perfection, TWO’s, unconditional love, THREE’s value or authenticity, FOUR’s true identity, FIVE’s brilliancy, SIXes strength, SEVENs magnificence and wonder, EIGHTs power, and NINEs wholeness. The vast majority of us, whatever may be our type, get off the track. Rather than going straight to God, the source of all divine attributes, we take detours by way of lesser means, which ultimately fail. Supposing you are a ONE. Instead of focusing on God, who is perfection itself, you try to perform perfectly on tasks. You try to set up the perfect relationship or find the perfect community. You look for perfection in yourself and in others. Your perfectionism ultimately brings out your “root sin”—anger. Why anger? Because you are totally frustrated in your attempt to find perfection in this world.

Thomas Aquinas is considered the finest theologian of the Middle Ages. In fact, he is considered to be one of the finest theologians of all times. I like to show off our copy of the *Summa* to visitors as it looks so impressive and weighs 20 pounds. It is also well-known that at the end of his life, Aquinas said, “All I have written seems like straw to me.” Was it really straw? No, it was some of the greatest theological thought of all time, but relative to the actual God Aquinas was writing about, yes it was straw.

I never would have imagined that the westward movement, the Enneagram, and Aquinas might find themselves in company. But they are all examples of how we may have to give up something valuable in the hopes of attaining something more valuable.

Paul had led a life of Jewish privilege and attainments. He was a trained Pharisee. There were never very many Pharisees, never more than six thousand, but they were the spiritual athletes of Judaism. They separated themselves from all common life and all common tasks in order to make it the one aim of their lives to keep every smallest detail of the Law. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul claims that not only was he a Jew that had retained his ancestral religion, but he had also devoted his whole life to its most rigorous observance. As for the righteousness which the law could produce, Paul was blameless. All these things Paul might have claimed to his credit. But when he met Christ, he wrote them off as nothing more than bad debts. "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss." He says, "All my life I have been trying to get into a right relationship with God. I tried to find it by strict adherence to the Jewish law; but I found the law and all its ways worse than useless to achieve that end...So I gave up trying to create a goodness of my own; I came to God in humble faith, as Jesus told me to do, and I found that fellowship I had sought so long."

Paul thought that if you are going to be Christian, then you should be like Jesus. So then, what do you do with your pride? What do you do with your valuable possessions? What do you do with your own agenda? What do you do with your own selfishness? What do you do with your own independence? You regard them as loss. Jesus Christ himself emptied himself and was obedient to death, even death on a cross, says Paul.

The Sufi mystic Rumi wrote this poem:

Once the noble Ibrahim, as he sat on his throne,
Heard a clamor and noise of cries on the roof,
Also heavy footsteps on the roof of his palace.
He said to himself, "Whose heavy feet are these?"
He shouted from the window, "Who goes there?"
The guards, filled with confusion, bowed their heads, saying,
"It is we, going the rounds in search."
He said, "What do you seek?" They said, "Our camels."
He said, "Whoever searched for camels on a housetop?"
They said, "We follow your example,
Who seeks union with God, while sitting on a throne."

So it seems to various religions, systems, and modes of thought that what is needed to dwell in the kingdom of God is to give up much of what people normally value—money, position, learning, even certain religious practices. These valuables, although fine in and of themselves, become baggage when we cling to them with attachment or think we can use them to buy our way into the kingdom of heaven.

There is no more fundamental task in life than facing the fact that there are many options for our lives and we must decide what is worth what. On the one hand, we can confuse something which has only relative value with something that has absolute value. On the other hand, we can not only recognize what is truly valuable, but we can organize our lives around what we have discerned to be of absolute worth. A certain re-ordering of our lives has led us to be here in this chapel at this time. At least up to a point, we have recognized what is truly gain and what is ultimately loss. Like Paul, we long to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. Let us press on to reach the goal for the prize of the heavenly call in Christ Jesus.