Paul almost gets carried away—almost as if he’s wistful for the kind of influence he used to have. It’s as if he’s saying, “You think you have a reason to hold onto your old life? Yeah, well I’ve got even more: I was circumcised, an Israelite, a Benjaminite (tribal pedigree), a Hebrew of Hebrew parents, a Pharisee (part of the power elite), a persecutor of heretics, and I was blameless of anything in the law.”

Again, he seems almost caught up in, mesmerized by, his own resume, as in, “Man, you shoulda known me then,” but all of a sudden he comes to himself (much like the prodigal son, who does the same, but in a different context) and says, “But none of that maters, it’s all just so much . . . tripe” (evidently the word in Greek is stronger than that).

“That’s right,” he says, “I had a well-ordered, tightly controlled life. On top of all that I’m a Roman citizen . . . but wait, that’s not my reason for writing to you. I’m here to tell you that none of that matters in the end, in any substantial way. Those are just credentials that I used to impress human beings. It doesn’t what others think of me . . . it doesn’t matter what you think of me. What matters is who I am in God’s eyes.”

“Not only that, but my life in many ways has become an outward mess since I became a follower of the way of Jesus.”

What he tells the Philippians (and us) is that those former ostensible advantages (“gains,” he calls them) become their very opposite. Instead of advancing his life, their effect was to hold him back from what really matters to him as a disciple. The more he strove for recognition in the world—the farther behind he fell in terms of what he had come to understand as real life, real value.

He presumably was attaining greater renown in his culture of misguided religious accomplishment as he rounded up more followers of Jesus, eventually standing on the sidelines at the stoning death of Stephen, whom we know as the first Christian martyr.

He had come a long way since his childhood in Tarsus. He had climbed the ladder of success, step by step, rung by rung, in a very orderly, well-ruled way.

God’s ordering of Paul’s will looks like the opposite of the petition in today’s collect: God smacked him senseless on the road to Damascus and sent him into the belly of the beast he had been persecuting. After those initial steps he underwent beatings, and imprisonments in the course of his adventurous journeys all over the known world.

It just doesn’t sound much like the ordering of Paul’s unruly will and affections. It looks in fact like the flip side of that.

UNLESS . . .

Unless we can see all this—as Paul almost certainly did, in his best moments—as God’s taking this bombastic, self-important personality and applying /it to God’s work in the world.

Paul did not become another person. He became more and more the person God created him to be from the very outset. Paul doesn’t seem to have abandoned his zealous nature in order to become a mild-mannered, soft-spoken presenter of peace and love.

Not in my opinion. Based on my reading of this man’s actions and thoughts an feelings (made known to us through his writings), I don’t think he was someone I’d want to spend a lot of time with. But he evidently lived with heroic faith and energy and conviction. He—by God’s grace and intervention—became the man who would write one of the most sublime expressions of *agape*, divine and selfless love, recorded in Christian scripture, the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, which ends, “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

His hymn to love is to Paul as the summary of the law is to Jesus (love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself).

Paul wrote that in his former life he had thought and acted as a child but subsequently did away with childish things. He was growing up into the person God intended him to be.

Now, like all of us, he backslides, slips back into old patterns of boasting and overreaching in his proclamations (“slaves, remain slaves,” for example). But he freely admits his errors, over and over. In today’s passage he writes, “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made [the goal of resurrection and faith] my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

All of this leads me to at least two conclusions:

1. God’s ordering of our unruly wills and affections is something different from what we might imagine. It just might take us in different directions than those we thought possible.
2. God can and does enlist us as the persons we are—bold extroverts like Paul or more soft-spoken, introverted, less adventurous types—to accomplish God’s purposes in the world.

Let us pray confidently that God will order our unruly wills and affections as God chooses and that we—in all the craziness of this world—may keep our hearts and minds open to true joys we will find as we help others to do the same.

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