

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
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Philippians 3:4-14
Matthew 21:33-46

“Gain or Loss?”

This week, as I considered this sermon, I kept moving back and forth between these two texts. One from Matthew and one from Philippians.

From the parable of the wicked tenants ...
to paragraphs from one of Paul's letters.
And then squeezed into that – World
Communion Sunday.

Finally, I discovered my focus in this passage that Jeanne read from Philippians ... Paul's letter to the people in the new church developing in Philippi.

I was drawn into this passage, partially, because I hear people say - and at times I find myself thinking - Paul is too full of himself.

Too opinionated.

Too confusing.

Some say, “Reading Paul's letters I miss the simple stories of Jesus.”

Paul, some say doesn't like women. Certainly he doesn't seem to respect women. Paul's just like most men. He's arrogant, controlling, and a windbag.

And this is one of those passages people point to:

Paul writes, “If anyone has reason to be confident, I have more reasons! I was circumcised on the 8th day,

I'm a member of the people of Israel.

A Hebrew born of Hebrews;

as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, I'm blameless.

And I am right there with Paul. I was circumcised on my 1st day.

I'm a Presbyterian, born of Presbyterians.

Trained in a Presbyterian seminary. A side-note on that score. Five of us from Head of Christiana took part in the Music/Worship/Sacraments conference last week at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA. A grand conference. I took part in one workshop where we went around the circle and introduced ourselves. I said, I'm Bob Undercuffler from Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church in Newark DE and I graduated from Princeton Seminary. Someone commented, "Well, excuse me."

I laughed, along with the group, but I let that pass. But like Paul, I'm tremendously zealous ... for my way. For how I understand and interpret and live-out God's way.

Yes, I can stand right there with Paul, parading my status – my credentials.

But having said that, Paul now makes a dramatic turn.

Without even recalling or hinting about a road to Damascus,
 Or a vision,
 Or a blinding light,
 Or falling to his knees,
 Or a strong-willed voice from heaven,

... Paul marks his change, conventionally referred to as his "conversion" in these words ...

"Whatever gains I had, (that list of gains, about which Paul had been most boastful) Whatever gains I can note, I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

But further, contrary to the popular impression we carry of Paul; that his call or his conversion was a solution to some problems he was having, or to the release from some deep moral or psychological or spiritual crisis.

Quite the opposite ... Because of Christ, all his accomplishments became for him simply "loss."

But even more strongly, it was the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus that led to the radical transformation of Paul's values, so he now regards them as "rubbish." The Greek word Paul wrote here is more aptly translated, "dung."

So even the best that Paul had accomplished, he now has come to recognize as nothing more than rotting garbage because he now knows Christ Jesus.

What does Paul mean by knowing Christ Jesus?

It means being "in him" – in Jesus, the Christ. Connected with Christ and all who believe in and follow Christ, Those to whom Paul refers to as "the body of Christ."

Knowing Christ Jesus means leaving aside the righteousness of his own accomplishments in favor of the righteousness "that comes through faith in Christ."

No longer can Paul speak or act or think as though his work is his own alone, or as if his work gained for him status before God. Rather, the righteousness Paul seeks is God's own. And that righteousness finally ends in resurrection, new life.

BUT PAUL HAS NOT YET ARRIVED. Paul acknowledges that he has not yet attained the goals he has set for himself. To being with Christ. And maturing in his faith.

He continues to pursue these goals, "because Christ Jesus has made me his own." More strongly... "because I have been overtaken by Christ Jesus." Because I have been captured by Christ Jesus.

Paul recognizes that he has been taken captive/seized/embraced by Christ Jesus.

Not that he initiated the relationship,
Or that he somehow earned it,

But because he was grasped by Christ, Paul now understands that he has been overpowered by God's grace ... a gift, and so he strives toward what lies ahead.

So often I hear the gospel proclaimed, or Jesus offered as the answer to life's problems.

You need money,
 You need happiness,
 You need a friend,
 You need to win the lottery....
 Turn to Jesus.

But the way Paul understands the good news ... the gospel ... is just the opposite ...

The good news, at its best, is not winning anything.
 The good news, at heart, is not being happy.
 The good news, at its core, is not having a friend
 or winning the lottery.

Rather, the good news is **Jesus Christ with you.**

Jesus Christ for you.

You are accepted by Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.

Now simply accept the fact that you are accepted.

**No, actually it is not so simple, for he can
 turn your life upside down.**

**But even more awesome, He can turn
 your life right-side up.**

Jesus gave Paul no answers to problems, but rather disrupted his answers and sent him in search of a new "solution" ... a deeper understanding. More precisely, it thrust a new understanding on Paul. An understanding that required radical reassessment of his past – his present -- his future.

Paul discovered that following Jesus is marked by forgetfulness and persistence and freedom –

as someone presses on running free toward the magnificent future that has dawned in our world.

Being met by Jesus in the power of his resurrection, and embracing him – his way, is the beginning of the journey, not the end, and it changes everything. Just ask Paul.