

10-11 #45

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalms 19

Matthew 21:33-46

Philippians 3:4-14

## Seeking the Un-human Prize

4If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

This is yet another one of those topsy-turvy scriptures. Similar to the stuff we find like, “the last shall be first and the first shall be last” – or “those who try to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives will save them.” Those scriptures which take what we have come to know to be true and has us confused – throws us off a little – makes us wonder what we know. And that is good! Because the premise of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is that humans don’t know as much as we would like to think we know – and the real truth of life lies in knowing God – and furthermore – the way Christians have come to know God is through the life of Jesus.

It is so easy to get confused as a human without divine guidance. Without divine guidance we would be accepting that status has everything to do with what one accomplishes on earth – what one owns – what physical power one wields – it is all equal to the value one has as a living creature. I’m sure we all remember those story puzzles where certain people are in a boat and yet for anyone to survive a certain number of those on the boat had to be sacrificed – and our job as a group was to determine whose life was most valuable and whose was least. These discussions are designed to get people talking about ethics and having a rudimentary foundation for people to ascertain each other’s values. But what Paul is saying is that all the values that people could conjure up are useless – the highest value anyone could have is the desire to want to understand Christ’s resurrection.

Paul, who is to this day considered one of the most spiritually aware, “Christ knowledgeable” persons ever – is writing to the Philippians because it seems some of them are under the illusion that they already possess absolute knowledge and awareness of Christ. And he is clarifying what the spiritual journey is all about for them.

Now, let us never believe that the path that Paul had taken before conversion was an acceptable understanding in Judaism. David Burrell points out, “For as much as the book of Deuteronomy may focus on observance, it continually reminds us how the Torah is sheer gift, grounded in the liberation of a slave people from their powerful masters in Egypt, and offered to them as a way to appreciate their new-found freedom by coming to respect themselves as partners with the creator of the universe, in a covenant freely offered.”

We have gone from a covenant with God through the gift of the Ten Commandments – a way of binding all together under laws of love and compassion – to realizing the relationship through faith in Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant – not in any way divergent from them. Knowing Christ has become the goal, in contrast to what Paul did before coming to know Christ – which was to count on his own personal achievements blocking out any possible chance for the God of compassion and creativity to be a part of him.

Paul counts down all that he accomplished – all that he had counted on in his life before as being a waste of time and energy! He counted on his superior status from this line of Benjamin and his discipline and zeal – he counted on himself alone – and all those things he now sees as having no value.

This scripture is, of course, so closely related to last week’s sermon where Paul wrote of Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a

slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

We are to be like Jesus in that we seek to find God’s will by emptying ourselves of those things for which we take our identity in – and in doing so – we will discover more about ourselves and God than we ever dreamed.

Emptying ourselves can also be freeing – often we cling to our accomplishments as a way of combating our sense of unworthiness, “See, I have a Master’s degree – aren’t I something – I lived in Europe for a long time – doesn’t that make me special!” In actuality, none of those accomplishments means anything if they separate me from my fellow humans – and therefore separate me from God as well. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

What we sometimes cling to out of insecurities in order to boost our own sense of worth, is really, sadly, not that which makes our lives truly complete. The positive side of that is; when we empty ourselves – we can empty ourselves of our insecurities too! When we realize what that nagging fear or insecurity is that defines us so – we can empty ourselves of that and become conscious that giving that over to God is also part and parcel of the relationship with Christ. If he can overcome death – he can certainly overcome anything from my past or present that keeps me from being compassionate to others or to myself.

Look at the news and listen to conversations and we will quickly come to the understanding that humans love a competition – and value is ranked monetarily or by popularity. And yet Paul is saying the greatest value is to know and be like Christ. Christ who was like God – and God who is love, and we are made ultimately in God’s image. Our true foundation as human beings is compassion. And yet it too often seems as though those values are the opposite of what humanity strives for. We are called to seek an *un-human* prize – and in doing so – we discover more of ourselves than we ever dreamed possible! See how topsy-turvy this faith thing is!?!?

In our Gospel we heard Christ say, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” And these words terrified those who had falsely adopted Saul’s way of thinking before he became Paul, for they were not even aware of what the fruits were that Jesus was referring to. What produce comes from God’s vineyards?

Jill Crainshaw wrote, “The primary aim of the life of faith, Paul insists in this letter, is to know Christ. Believers are called first and foremost to pursue and share that ‘prize’ with personal *and communal* authenticity.” “Communal authenticity” . . . The Ten Commandments were given to the newly freed Israelite slaves as a way of creating a bond between them and God and between each other. They had lived so long under the Egyptians they didn’t seem to know anymore who God was who they were. They didn’t have much of even a sense of self achievement to count upon. They were hungry and thirsty and restless and homeless – and God gave them something to unify them so they could bond with each other and become safer, more secure, calmer, unified, hopeful, in the face of the utter chaos that they were living in at the time. And this bond worked! They became a strong force in the universe instead of being a lost tribe that dissolved into Egyptian history.

And Christ gave us the chance to break through any other barriers to fully be able to merge with God and discover our greatest potential as humans – and it is and always shall be as a community.

Wonders and glory just seem to happen when a group of people come together – inspired by love and compassion. Paul presses on *toward* the goal. Annette Weissenreider wrote, “he wins the prize, not by coming in first, but simply by crossing the finish line.” Which then reminded me of all those walks – the Crop walk – the Avon and Susan Kommen walks – all kinds of opportunities for people to be together and it isn’t a competition which singles individuals out but unites all those people in a holy cause!

And that is why we are a congregation. We are called to work together as a community – not to compete with any other church – or even to compete with a former image of ourselves – but to discover together who Christ is – and what we are called to do – to produce fruits of the kingdom – and to conquer any fear with the confidence of the grace of God in each other.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.