

RUBBISH AND RESURRECTION

Philippians 3:4-14

Matthew 21:33-46

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TEXT: Philippians 3:8 “More 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.”

PURPOSE: To encourage us to value knowing Christ, having our lives caught up in his life, over everything else we value, and in this, to experience true abundance of life.

The first church I served was a country parish in Pennsylvania made up of a few extended families. One small family exercised quite a bit of influence through two sisters named Twila and Luthera. These women and their husbands were devoted to the church, active in its programs and its leadership, and always ready to voice their unfiltered opinions.

Probably before I was thirty years old, I preached a sermon in that church that had the same title as the sermon I’m preaching today: *Rubbish and Resurrection*. I took the title from the passage we just heard from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, in which he states that, compared to the surpassing value of a relationship with Christ, he has come to regard all the things he used to think of as valuable to be rubbish. I don’t remember exactly what I said in that sermon, but before I dig deeper into what happened when I preached it, I want to take a look at what Paul was dealing with in his correspondence with the Christians in Philippi.

Apparently, there were some people with some influence among the Philippian Christians who were “making mischief” (Phil 3:2, Jerusalem Bible translation) by extolling a righteousness based on physical evidence. That evidence involved obeying the law of Moses, which, after all, was in the Bible—what we call the “Old Testament”—which Christians back then regarded as sacred scripture. But at a deeper level, this righteousness, which Paul called “confidence in the flesh,” had to do with anything which we achieve by our own effort. We all probably have some knowledge of the Ten Commandments. These certainly are essential rules for relating rightly to God and to each other. But “confidence in the flesh” for Paul stood for the dangerous error which concludes that we can, by obeying laws such as these, achieve a righteousness which gains God’s favor and secures our salvation.

In the passage we heard this morning, Paul let the Philippians know that if those were the conditions for confidence, he had everyone beat. He was born an ethnic Jew and became a Pharisee, which meant he had been committed to full obedience to the whole of the law. He claimed to have been without fault as to compliance with the law’s particulars. But that, Paul said, was his old life. In his new life as a follower of Jesus, he now regarded all his previous self-made righteousness to be rubbish, compared to the “surpassing value of knowing Christ

Jesus” as his lord. What counts now, he confessed, was not self-confidence, but confidence in God. The great value is not what I can make of myself, but what God in Christ can make of me, which ultimately is a person who experiences the power of Christ’s resurrection.

All right. Back to what happened when I preached on this passage thirty-plus years ago. Twila heard something in my message which infuriated her. Twila being Twila, I learned how she was feeling rather quickly. “We work hard for this church!” she said. “We’re always looking for ways to make it a nice place for people. We try to live decent Christian lives, and to look out for each other. And you’re telling us that everything we do is just a lot of junk!” It’s a strange thing. I remember lots of things about that first church I served. I remember the people so clearly, and so many little things about them. But this is the only sermon I have any memory of preaching, and all that I remember about it, beyond the title, is that Twila was upset by it. I recall that Twila fired her initial salvo right after worship, perhaps right as people were shaking my hand as they were leaving the building. I was young, and not in the least skilled at dealing with people who were upset with me, but I did realize something needed to be done beyond telling her that I didn’t mean what she thought I meant.

First of all, I wondered, could it have been that I did mean what she thought I said? There I was, an ordained minister under thirty years old with a distinguished educational pedigree, serving a tiny rural parish whose active members were more interested in raising money to pad the pews than in deeply engaging with the claims of Christ. Twila and her husband Charlie, and Luthera and her husband Bob, were major participants in what they called, “The Young Married Couples Group.” That group didn’t meet for prayer or study; they met to plan the next fundraiser or social event. Maybe I did think that what was dear to Twila was pretty worthless. That was a possibility I had to ponder by myself.

But I also needed to face the wrath of Twila. So I packed up my sermon manuscript and arranged for a visit to their home. I invited her to read exactly what I’d said. Thankfully, it didn’t throw the pew cushions and the baked steak suppers onto the junk heap. But reading my words didn’t mollify Twila. There was a much deeper spiritual issue which had been stirred in her. It was at this moment that I realized what all preachers must learn, and that is, our sermons are completed in the minds and the hearts of the people who are listening to our sermons. That evening, Twila, Charlie, and I dug into what my sermon had stirred in them. I heard their

sense of what it meant to be a Christian, and more, I started realizing the value of their way of being faithful. I don't know if Twila changed her mind about what she thought I'd said. But I do know that she let me be her pastor through a long, peculiar, and painful ailment which eventually, after I left that church, took her life. I do know that after Bob, her brother in law, died of a dreadful cancer, that Luthera taught me most of what I know about how angry we can be with God. I do know that the Young Married Couples Group changed its name to "Pairs and Spares" to make room for Luthera even when she was so angry that she wasn't coming to worship, and was almost never easy to be around. Which was my first experience of a church being open and affirming, of making room for someone who was difficult to be with, out of sincere love.

And I know something else. Twila's confrontation made me realize that I had been being a bit too much like Paul had been when he had reason to be confident in the flesh. After all, I was born and raised in the United Church of Christ. I had been pursuing a call to ministry since I was seventeen years old. I had been educated at a distinguished college and one of the greatest of seminaries. And I started serving St. John's unconsciously nursing an attitude that I was better than my parishioners were. If I was to help my people distinguish rubbish from resurrection, I certainly needed to take a hard look at what I thought earned me God's favor.

There is lots about the life of faith that we dearly love. For most of us, what has great value are the relationships which have developed with others in our congregation. For many of us, we also become quite attached to the building we call "our church," even though the true church is the community which, to use Paul's language, is seeking "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." Lots of us, myself included, hold dear the great traditions of traditional religion: our hymns, our seasons and the way we keep them, and events like our Summer Fair and our suppers. Most of us, myself included, would join Twila in taking offense at any insinuation that the things which are dear to us in this life of faith are just a bunch of junk.

But listen carefully to Paul. It is not that whatever he valued before he became a Christian, or whatever we greatly value about our involvement in church *is* rubbish. It is that, when compared with the surpassing value of a lively relationship with Jesus Christ, everything that we reckoned as of great value pales in comparison. This is because faith teaches us that none of the things which are dear to us, not our support of the church and its ministries, not our obedience to God's commands or our righteous deeds, works in any way to achieve our salvation, our right relationship

with God. Only God's gracious effort on our behalf, completed in Jesus Christ, draws us into the life God designed us to live, the life which shares in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is all about grace, about God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. But Paul never leaves grace to stand by itself, and neither should we. The message is not, since nothing we do improves our status before God, we are free to do nothing. The message is, in Paul's words: "Not that I have already attained this." Not, he is saying, that he has arrived, that he is fully living the resurrected life. Rather, "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Philippians 3:12)

Responding to grace, allowing ourselves to be caught up in grace, is hard spiritual work. Seeking the righteousness which comes through faith in Christ is hard spiritual work. Certainly it involves obedience to the Ten Commandments, but it just as much involves dispensing with any notion that our obedience improves our status before God. Certainly it involves participation in the community of faith, but it just as much involves dispensing with any notion that our status before God is improved by how many programs we support or how much money we give. Certainly it involves daily nourishment of our faith through worship, prayer, study, and service; but it just as much involves dispensing with any notion that God is ranking us on the basis of the relative fervor of our faith practices. This is hard work, this trusting God to accomplish for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. What we celebrate is what Paul realized so long ago: the important thing is that Christ has already made us his own. God's saving grace, made real in the life, the suffering, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, has already accomplished all that needs to be accomplished for our lives to be filled with the joy, the peace, and the right relationships which God wants for us. All we need to do is to make this life our own. We will still have a church, and it still will need our support. We will still be the church, thank God, and the world will continue to need the church to demonstrate Christ's love for all people. We will still be blessed by our relationships with each other; we will still be blessed and nourished by our traditions. What Twila and her friends at St. John's taught me is that the new life in Christ still enjoys potlucks, still brings people together to support the institution which is the church. Perhaps what we learned together, and what remains an urgent lesson for every community which bears Christ's name and shares his life, is that it is the new life in Christ which is of surpassing value, and it is the new life in Christ which gives value to everything we do as we seek to claim that for which we have been claimed, which is to share Christ's life now and always.