

Pentecost 18, 10.4.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 5:1-7, 25-32; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

“To Know Christ”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.* Amen. Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church!

Anyone familiar with electronic devices and computers today knows what it’s like on occasion to have a computer, device, or phone freeze or start doing strange things. Today it has almost become second nature for us to restart the computer, device, or phone because we know that restarting, rebooting, or even restoring the computer to its factory settings, will usually solve the problem. It’s not foolproof, but it often does work.

Obviously, people aren’t computers, but this does make me think about our modern world. For all of our modernity and progress, as human beings we also still experience problems. We are still subject to illness and death; we say and do things that hurt others; we fall short of the good that we know we should do and that we are actually capable of. Recently I heard someone make the comment, “Maybe we could just turn America off and back on again, and we could reset it.” I smiled, laughed, and thought, “If it were only that easy!”

Yet the Psalm for today, Psalm 80, says something that reminds me of this: “*Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine that we may be saved.*” The psalmist wasn’t writing about resetting or restoring a computer, rather, the psalmist spoke about restoring something far more precious and complicated: our true humanity. God offers to restore us to the way we should be. Knowing God allows us to experience the life that we were created for. Knowing Christ allows us to live for, not only ourselves, but to live for and suffer with others. We can’t simply push a power button and turn ourselves off and on again; rather, rather, it is God who restores us with grace because God has created us to know God. God has created us with the gift of an inherent receptivity to grace, to love, and to forgiveness.

In today’s second reading, Paul talks about knowing Christ. Paul says, “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his suffering...*” Paul says he wants “to know Christ.” Like the psalmist who says, “*Restore us, O God of hosts,*” Paul is confident that in knowing Christ, he will be made well. Paul isn’t simply talking about knowledge *about* Christ, Paul want *to know* Christ. Paul is saying to Christ, “I want to get to know you better. I don’t just want to hear about you, I want to participate in your life, and I need your grace and power in my life.”

So Paul wrote to the Philippians encouraging them to get to know Christ better – to put Christ at the center of their lives. Paul is really asking them and us a question: “Do you know Christ? Do you want to know Christ and his power for you? Do you want to be restored to fullness of life with God?”

Now Paul has some definite ideas about what it means to know Christ. It means knowing the righteousness of Christ, the power of his resurrection, and participation in his sufferings. God hit the reset button, so to speak, on Paul’s entire previous life, making Paul into a disciple of Christ.

Before Paul became a Christian, he had also been a very religious person. Paul was a Pharisee, and a model follower of the Jewish law. Paul even bragged a bit to the Philippians about being more zealous than anyone, because he had persecuted Christ and the church. However, rather than a relationship with the living God, Paul had had a relationship with the Jewish law, and just as the law is unforgiving, it made Paul unforgiving toward others.

In today’s remarkably moving second reading, Paul says that he threw away his life as a Pharisee in order to know Christ. Paul discarded and abandoned his résumé of Pharisaic achievements, because they did not help him to know Christ.

We all know the story of Paul meeting the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. The Book of Acts tells us Paul was traveling with letters for the Damascus synagogues from the high priest in Jerusalem, letters that gave Paul the authority to arrest and bring Christians back to Jerusalem for trial. On his way to Damascus, Paul (or Saul as he was then named) was met by the risen Christ, who asked him, “*Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?*” Saul asked, “*Lord, who are you?*” *The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”*

Paul thought he knew all about Christians and Jesus. He had heard about Christ and Christians, and he didn’t like what he had heard. Paul had decided that they were wrong in the eyes of the law and needed to be utterly stamped out. Christ’s response to Paul tells us a lot about Christ: Christ restored Paul so that he could be in relationship to God rather than to the law. Christ was not a vindictive God who punished Paul for his sins; rather, Christ gave Paul forgiveness, a new start, and a new identity as a co-worker in the vineyard. Paul became Christianity’s first great missionary.

Paul shares his encounter with Christ, because he wants others to know Christ. To know Christ is to be known by Christ. It is Christ who came to Paul, and it is Christ who daily comes to us saying, “*Follow me.*” To know Christ is to discover who we really are. To know Christ is to begin a journey of discovery in which we discover the meaning of our lives through being forgiven by Christ, and

through discarding and abandoning our old selves. In knowing Christ, Paul discarded his past life and discovered who he was and why God had given him the gift of life.

We spend so much of our lives creating a “self” that we present to the world. Paul certainly did. Paul runs through his résumé of achievements, only to say that none of it means anything now that he knows Christ. In meeting Christ, Paul met himself for the first time and threw away his former self-understanding. Christ restored Paul to the life he had been created for.

Yet our modern era and modern ways make it much harder to know Christ. We are suspicious of things that we cannot physically verify and touch. Spiritual concerns are often pushed out of the center of our lives. People are more likely to trust in the information their devices and phones tell them, rather than in the message that the God whom they cannot see has for them.

Jesus’ parable and Isaiah’s story about God’s vineyard are about rebellious tenants and workers who were a lot like Paul. They had a chance to care for and welcome the God’s prophets and God’s own Son, but instead they abused and killed the prophets and the Son, whom God had sent to them.

Paul thought that the religious life was about following the letter of the religious law, rather than seeking the justice, righteousness, and love that the law points us toward. Jesus told the parable about the unjust tenants to expose the religious leaders of his day as people out to usurp God’s vineyard – God’s justice, righteousness, and love.

What Paul experienced was “*metanoia*,” a change in direction, a change in life that led him to know Christ. In 1944 a Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote something similar from his prison cell outside Berlin. In a letter to a friend, Bonhoeffer wrote, “It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is *metanoia*: not in the first place thinking about one’s own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event” of Christ Jesus. *Metanoia* means allowing God to restore our lives in the direction of Christ.

When Paul writes, “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead,*” Paul is telling the Philippians that he is concerned about them and their needs, problems, sins, and fears. After meeting Jesus, Paul became convinced that the concerns of Christ, the suffering of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ were the only power that could give his life true meaning.

Do you take time to know Christ? Do you spend time in prayer with Christ? Daily do you seek the power of Christ’s resurrection – and Christ’s living presence – to focus your time, your gifts,

and your possessions on the needs, problems, sins, and fears of others?

Like Paul, we have not yet fully made the gifts of Christ our own, but like Paul, we press on toward the goal of the heavenly call of Christ Jesus. To journey with Christ is a lifetime journey. We cannot reach the goal of the kingdom of heaven without the lifetime journey of faith.

Do you know Christ? Do you spend time in prayer with Christ? Do you seek to allow the power of Christ's resurrection to guide all you do in life?

Jesus comes to each of us again and again. Each and every day, the same Christ who met Paul on the road to Damascus, meets us on our life's busy roads. Christ comes to each of us with the power of his resurrection, with grace and with love.

The grace of Christ forgives and restores us to be the people God created us to be, but we must tend to that resurrection power of Jesus. The grace of Christ will free you again today. Open your heart and your mind to know Christ and his benefits for you. The living power of Christ will restore you again, so that over a lifetime, you can freely love and serve others. Amen.