

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

“Letting Go, and Pressing Forward”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

In one of the most startling passages in his letters, Paul writes of letting go, of leaving his past behind, and moving forward into the future with God. Paul writes, “*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.*” Paul’s statement is also a question for us: How good are you at letting go – of leaving the past behind and moving forward into the future with God?

When we are encountered with change, often we cling to the past; we cling to what is familiar. Yet we also know that the Holy Spirit continues to work new things in our lives. God continues to speak to our world, encouraging us to strain forward – to live into God’s future – so that we might know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Paul’s presentation of himself is something all of us are familiar with. Paul gives us his “CV” so to speak, his resume, as an Israelite. Paul was second to none in his membership to the people of Israel. He writes: “*circumcised 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*” Yet in meeting Jesus Christ, Paul regards all of his family, ethnic and religious background as, in his words, “loss and rubbish.” Paul’s words are startling and they challenge us to ask ourselves, “Who am I?”

Paul’s presentation of himself is familiar because human beings often tell one another that they come from a certain family, a certain school or university, a certain nation, a certain religion, a certain church, or even a certain part of a church’s storied past. We say these things to one another to prove how righteous or blameless we are. We even say these things to demonstrate that we are better than others. We rarely, however, take the next step that Paul takes, of saying, “You can have all of it, because it all really doesn’t matter. All that matters is knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection.

The enormous radicality of Paul’s statement should cause us to stop and ask ourselves, “Could I, like Paul, let go of everything except for Christ? Does knowing Christ change everything else in my life?” In a sense, Paul is saying, “My background, where I was born and who I understood myself to be no longer matter because Christ has given me a new identity.”

Paul is pushing all of the buttons here: his gender as a circumcised male, his national identity as a Jew, his ethnic identity in the tribe of Benjamin, his religious affiliation as a Hebrew, his denominational identity as a Pharisee. We even hear the echo of what Paul wrote ten years earlier in the Letter to the Galatians (3:28-29), “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” For Paul, what mattered was not what the world told him about his identity, but his new identity in Christ that gave him forgiveness and shared humanity with others.

For Paul, knowing Christ changed everything in his life. Paul counts as loss all things for the sake of Christ. It reminds me of that Fanny Crosby hymn, *Take the World, but Give Me Jesus*. Can you regard as loss and rubbish all that the world tells you to be? Gender, national identity, denominational belonging, ethnic and cultural affiliations? Can you deny yourself and follow Jesus alone? Can you leave everything behind to press forward to find everything in Christ? Paul has completely surrendered himself to Jesus Christ.

We are nearing the end of the season of Lent, and Paul’s radical statement of his new identity in Christ is meant to give us pause to ask, “Who am I, and what defines who I am? Am I who my family, nation, denomination, ethnicity, or culture say that I am?” One who had persecuted Christ was now grasped by the risen Christ; Paul was forgiven and raised to new life.

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.*” During Lent at St. Mark’s, we look upon the crucifix on the high altar revealing God hidden in Christ in the suffering of the cross. This is pure Lutheran theology. Martin Luther wrote that in Christ’s cross we see God both hidden and revealed in suffering. Paul saw in the cross of Christ the only thing that mattered to him. Paul desired to participate in Christ’s suffering and in his resurrection.

In today’s gospel reading, we are told that six days before the Passover, his Passion and his Cross, Jesus had dinner in the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary. The next day, Jesus would enter Jerusalem as palms were laid before him. At that meal, Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, and in doing so, was, as Paul writes, “*sharing in his sufferings,*” and preparing Jesus for his suffering, death and resurrection. Mary took the most precious thing she possessed and used it, spending it all upon Jesus. Like Paul giving up all he had for Christ, Mary, too, gave all she had, helping Christ prepare for the suffering and cross that lay ahead. This is what love looks like. Love gives everything for another.

The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Just as Paul's life was filled with Christ, so that nothing else mattered, Mary's anointing of Jesus reveals that our sacrifice for Christ, our participation in the sufferings of Christ, can fill the world with the fragrance of love.

This story also reminds us that Jesus must have given Judas the responsibility to care for the common purse because he had capabilities in the management of funds. Yet we are also told that Judas did not care about the poor but only about how he could steal from these funds. Judas enjoyed the responsibility and the role, but without the love. To say it another way, unlike Mary and Paul, Judas was a disciple in name only.

There is something here to consider as we approach Holy Week: What is your gift that you give to Christ? What is the gift that you give which will fill the world with the fragrance of Christ's love? Christ seeks not a token gift, but our very selves, our hearts, our minds and our lives. Mary gave all that she had, and Paul gave up all that he had. They each sought only Christ.

Like the words of Fanny Crosby's hymn, *Take the World, but Give Me Jesus*, is Jesus alone enough for you? Can you regard as loss and rubbish all that the world tells you that you must be or do? Gender, national identity, denominational belonging, ethnic and cultural affiliations are not who we really are. Lord, Jesus, take all of these, but let me share in your suffering so that I might attain the resurrection. Take the world, but give me Jesus.

We see it all around us. People clinging to this world, to its ideologies, nationalisms, and cultural conventions. People want to tell others how to be. People also attempt to force others to share in their ideologies and nationalisms. Some even seek to cleanse the world of religious, ethnic, gender and "traitorous" national differences. We see it all around us. People insist on others being like them, rather than becoming more and more like Jesus.

Christianity is not about the empty glory of this world; it is about sharing in the suffering of Christ for others so that we might also share in Christ's resurrection. Imagine a world without Jesus. Imagine a world where people demanded and forced others to be like them. Imagine a world where people stole from the poor. You can take that world, because it does not know Jesus. Such a world is filled not with love, but with division and hatred. Jesus came to save us from this world.

Mary and Paul reveal the way to Jesus: Deny yourself, give yourself to Jesus for his cross and his suffering. Fill the world with the fragrance of suffering love for others.

Walk with Jesus and you will attain the resurrection.

Cling not to this world, but cling to Christ. Amen.