

The Surpassing Value of Knowing Christ Jesus
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Philippians 3:4b-14

⁴ If 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.

⁷ Yet 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.

¹² Not 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 towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

John 12:1-8

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

What have we been pointing toward all of Lent? Our scriptures have guided us in ways to turn back toward God, the literal meaning of "to repent." Today is no exception. The truest, most reliable guide toward God is Christ; the truest way is through Christ. Today's reading from Philippians is a biblical language scholar's dream – we read this morning "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ..." Students of biblical Greek will tell you that the best understanding of ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ is "but through the faith of Christ." Not "through faith in Christ" but "through the faith of Christ."

This is a rather important difference, I'd say. There is absolutely nothing wrong with faith in Christ, as long as we do not satisfy ourselves thinking our own faith is enough. What does "through the faith of Christ" mean exactly? Let's hear the passage again: "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of Christ..." In the same way that we will soon celebrate Christ's victory over death on our behalf, something we could not ever do on our own, we can rejoice in Christ's righteousness on our behalf. We could never be righteous enough in God's sight on our own. Through Christ's own faithfulness we receive the gift of unmerited righteousness. Through Christ's faithfulness we have the perfect example of how to be in relationship with, how to be obedient to, and how to love God.

This is what Paul is saying when he writes, "Not 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." He writes, too, of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus. To know Christ Jesus has just as much to do with being known by Christ. What does it look like to be known? Well, we have examples in our reading in John. To be known means to be raised from the dead, not just literally. To be known means to be defended when you do what is right in God's sight. Maybe most of all, to be known means to be welcomed, even if you are a thief. We read frequently about how Christ dined with sinners, tax collectors, all sorts of unsavory people of the time. While John is painting the details of an ugly picture of Judas, the bigger picture which develops shows Jesus loving this one who was so close to him, even with his flaws. Again, to be known by Christ means to be welcomed, even if you are a thief, even if there are parts of you which are far from righteous.

So, to know Christ is to know that Christ will raise you up, defend you, and welcome you. If you know this, then you know, too, that the world's credentials fall away when Christ looks at you. What Christ sees in you has nothing to do with what the world looks for in you. And for this reason, Paul says, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 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." Paul has done everything right by the standards of the Jewish world. He has followed all of the laws. He was born into the right family. He speaks of being a Pharisee, whom we often regard with disdain – in reality, at the time, Pharisees were admired for their strict adherence to the laws of the Torah, considered extra holy, extra blessed. As a Pharisee, he demonstrated why we tend to look at them with disdain – he thought that those who were following Christ were making a mockery of Judaism and so he persecuted the early believers until God stopped him in his tracks and showed him that he was going the wrong

way, taking the law where it was not intended. According to strict adherents of the letter of Jewish law, however, he was right, right, right.

But that is not what makes him righteous before Christ. He is only righteous before Christ because he has humbly presented himself before Christ so that Christ might make him righteous. He realized really, truly, nothing else mattered, and so all the things he focused on that were not Christ were “as loss.” Isn’t that what we’ve been trying to do during Lent? To shuttle off the things which keep our focus off God; to reorient our compasses toward God and get away from those things which pull the needle off of true north? If we have managed, even a little, as we progress through Lent, we are coming to more intimately understand our own relationship with our Creator and our Redeemer.

And in that, we progress a little closer toward what Professor Douglas F. Ottati describes as “the most important thing in life (and in death) – our relation to God.”¹ He writes, “. . .our relation to God – is *not* a matter of what *we* do. It is, as the longer theological tradition says, a matter of *grace*.”² He continues, “With the frame of Paul’s gospel, then, reliance on God’s grace in Christ displaces our frenetic secular and religious efforts to guarantee our own worth and/or divine favor.”³ I don’t know about you but I have a long way to go still from my own frenetic ways to full reliance on God’s grace in Christ. But I’m trying. I’m trying to get to a way of living where I, too, can say, “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Grant us, O Lord, that we might ever more value the faith of Christ above our own faith, our own accomplishments, our own gains, we pray. Amen.

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 138.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*