

Wanting to Know Christ
Texts: Matthew 21:33-46, Philippians 3:4b-14
Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – October 4, 2020
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Elizabeth Shively, Director of Teaching at University of St. Andrews School of Divinity in Scotland, writes of this text from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, "This passage invites us to reflect on what we value most. A recent Reuters poll reveals that Americans value 'time' first, with 'career,' 'success,' and 'money' coming in as close seconds for certain groups of people. What we value most is likely demonstrated by how we spend our time and how we spend our resources.

At one point, the apostle Paul spent all his time and resources pursuing and persecuting Christians, establishing a successful career as a devout Pharisee. When he writes the letter to the Philippians, he has changed course so that he now spends all his time and resources pursuing Christ. His career success appears to be in shambles because he lands in prison for the sake of Christ. However, what looks like a failed career contributes to the fulfillment of Paul's calling as a minister to the Gentiles because he is able to communicate the gospel to the prison guards (2:12-18). Paul's change of course demonstrates what he values most" (From Internet. www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1592. 09/29/20).

You can see from this text from Philippians 3 that Paul had a change of course. What mattered to him the most – what Paul valued the most – earlier in his life was the status he had attained for himself. He was the model follower of the Law, the Hebrew of the Hebrews. He was zealous and righteous. Paul was educated by the best teachers, and his pedigree was unmatched. All of the accomplishments he had achieved would be something that a first century Jewish man would have only dreamed of. Yet, for Paul, it was reality.

But. In verses 7 and 8, we see this dramatic shift. “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.” After Paul’s encounter with Christ on the Road to Damascus, all of that changed. Everything that he thought was important – everything that he put his worth into – turned out to be nothing. Actually, less than nothing. He calls everything not connected to his walk with Jesus Christ garbage. GARBAGE. His education. His status. His position in the community. As good – or not – as the trash we throw away each week.

For to Paul, knowing Christ is worth so much more. It was all about Christ for Paul. Everything in his life was now measured against how it complemented and nurtured his love for his Savior, Jesus Christ. Every action he took – every word he spoke – every mission he traveled – yes, even every hour and day that he spent in prison was all for Jesus Christ. That became his focus from the time he was blinded on the road. All so that he might gain Christ.

As we read and study this passage of Scripture, the question must come to mind for us – what do we value the most in life? What are our priorities? Where is our focus? Is it on work – our career, claiming our place on the corporate ladder or achieving the goals we have set for ourselves successfully? Is our priority on the size of our house, the kind of car we drive, how many toys we have? Is our value measured in the size of our 401k and investments or how much we will have for retirement? How do we spend our time? Is it in quality ways, or do we waste way too much of our days at work or school? On our electronics – playing games or checking email or Facebook? Now, individually, these things are not necessarily bad. However, when they become all we work for – all we strive for – all we spend our time doing, then they become the garbage that Paul mentions. Where we spend our time affirms for us what truly matters to us.

These last six months have been a great opportunity for some of us to recognize what matters in life. Some have been able to refocus and what was important and vital prior to March suddenly has lost the meaning that it once had. We have been forced to spend more time with our families, with our spouses, and hopefully that has been a great thing for our relationships.

I do believe that this pandemic has been a good thing for the church. It has forced us to try new things – like Zoom and other technology. It has brought people back to church. Our attendance is up significantly over last year. We are reaching across the United States with our worship, and God is in our midst. We have realized – and reaffirmed – that we cannot do pandemic without Christ. We cannot thrive in the midst of these very trying times without the power and presence of God helping and guiding us through our days.

In verse 10, Paul writes, “I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” Paul wants to REALLY know Christ. To know the power of his resurrection, to more fully understand how Jesus defied death on the cross and was raised to new life. To participate in His sufferings and become like Him in His death. Wait, what? Who is ready to affirm that? Who wants to participate in the sufferings of our Lord today? You think pandemic is bad? Christ’s suffering was that much worse!

And Paul says that he wants to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me. Christ took hold of Paul with agape’ love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness, and now Paul wants to take hold of those things in his own life to bring others – the church – to Christ in a deeper and more real way. This is a big picture goal for Paul – to live a life that is worthy of the call of Christ on

his life. Essentially, he wants to establish his legacy in Christ, making his defining mark that of Jesus Christ. In order to press onward and keep his eye on the prize.

With all of that, do we want to know Christ? Do we want to understand Christ more fully in His suffering and death for us and in the power of His resurrection? Do we want to take hold of the love, grace, mercy and forgiveness that Christ took hold of for you and for me? Doing so will change us. It will transform us – and put us into a position where we can never go back. What is our legacy? How do we want to be remembered? For how much we worked? For the “stuff” we acquired? For the explosive temper or words that cut to the heart? Or for knowing Christ and sharing the love of Christ with others?

I have thought a lot this week about legacy. As I shared last Sunday, my oldest friends’ mom died last week. Mrs. Mears lived 2 houses down from the house I grew up in for over 50 years. She was a second mom to me. I would talk with her about things when I was in high school and college that I could not have talked with my parents about. And my parents were thankful that I had that outlet! She was kind, compassionate, and generous. When you were with her, she was the type of person who made you feel like you were the most important person in the room – and this continued as dementia slowly took her away from us. That was her legacy and it will live on in her daughters, family, and friends. And me. What will be our legacy? To be loving, giving, compassionate, and kind? Certainly we need that all the more today.

As we prepare to gather around the table of our Lord on this World Communion Sunday, we are invited to know Christ more. To experience His death and resurrection through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Do you want to know Him? Do you want to experience Him more fully? Let that be our goal. Let us pray...

Loving and gracious God, we want to know Christ more. We want to make Him our priority in all areas of our lives. But it is tough. The draw from some many other things tempts us to put

Him second or third or even lower. Give us, we pray, the desire and the will to put Christ first – to know Him more and more. In His name we pray, Amen.