

## **Garbage and Grace**

### **Acts 9:1-9 Philippians 3:4-16**

We reach a personal, autobiographical section. Paul shares a bit of his history, and his heart. He begins by saying: watch out for the legalists. Those who say you're only a true Christian if you fulfill all the aspects of the Jewish law first, like they have done. We might call this "Jesus and..." Jesus and these rules. Jesus and this theology. Jesus and these traditions. Then he says, if anyone has reason to brag about keeping all of that he does. Here is how he puts it:

### **Philippians 3:4-16**

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh (in my human abilities and accomplishments and intelligence), I have more: <sup>5</sup>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; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>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 <sup>9</sup>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, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if 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. <sup>13</sup>Beloved, 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, <sup>14</sup>I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord

At Christmastime, when asked what I want for Christmas, the last couple of years I have found myself saying: I don't really want or need things, I'd prefer *experiences*. Adventures and outings and the like. Things are good too! I'll never turn down things. I have just found that I prefer experiences these days.

If I could summarize what Paul is saying in this passage, it would be: I want *experiences* of the risen Christ, and all that goes along with that—both the good, *and* challenging: the power of his resurrection (very good!), and... sharing in his sufferings, which seems like a funny thing to want, but he knows that difficulties and pain can be redemptive too, like we talked about last week. They lead to resurrection and life. Because the Suffering Servant knows *our* suffering, and can transform it; for our sakes, and for the sake of others.

So, he wants *experiences* with the living Christ. Paul doesn't say, "I want to know theology so that I might have encyclopedic knowledge *about* Christ, and

press on toward the goal of having doctrinal perfection.” Just the opposite, he says, “I want to know... Christ.” It’s that simple.

He says, in his own way, I’m done with things and accomplishments. They’re garbage. “I regard them as rubbish” he says. The word “rubbish” here in Greek is literally the word “dog poop.” In Martin Luther’s German Bible (since we’re giving a nod to Reformation Sunday), when he translated this passage directly from Greek to German, he used the German word “kot.” This is the German equivalent of the English word that begins with the letter c and rhymes with “rap.” Pretty bold! Anyway, Paul says that all of his past accomplishments and acquisitions are dog doo to him. Poop in a bag tossed into the garbage can. He gives us a little list of his accomplishments and things he can brag about, and says, they don’t mean anything to him anymore. He prefers the experience of knowing Christ, and as part of that, he says, I’m going to be forward-looking.

This is the Paul who had quite the experience on the road to Damascus, as we heard. It’s important to note that the risen Christ gave him an *experience* that was life-changing, not a *doctrinal lecture* that was life changing. It was a bright light, an audible voice, and a temporary blindness. And then (when we read the

rest of Acts 9) God sent him a Jesus-follower named Ananias, who came alongside him to help interpret his experience to him, along with the community of faith.

The voice along the road challenged Saul, the zealous crusader for righteousness, who thought he was doing God a favor by persecuting the Christians (based on... his acquired knowledge and outstanding behavior). So it was an *experience* of the risen Christ that jolted him into awareness, and moved him into a new way of being and seeing... literally. His becoming blinded and then regaining his sight was heavily symbolic of receiving a new way of seeing; of receiving new vision.

And the voice that spoke to Saul was one that expressed the pain of relationship: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" It wasn't a messenger from God who said, "Saul, Saul, why don't you correctly understand the doctrine of the atonement?? Your doctrine is all messed up."

Jesus didn't get Saul's attention with an improved theology, or a new doctrinal statement, but with a blinding experience of God's goodness and grace. Which then, over time, shaped and formed his theology (which we read and hear in his New Testament letters). But the experience came first. Encounter with the risen Christ came first.

So when Paul, now an older man writing from prison, says, “I count it all as loss; I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings,” he is reflecting back on the difference between having *things*, and having *experiences*, in the Christian faith. “Things” being: accomplishments, perfection, pedigree, straight A’s in school, intellectual prowess, all the stars and stickers. All of which qualified him to be a theological Olympian. If there was such a thing as an Olympics for theology and doctrine, Paul was a gold medalist. But he says, the gold medal can go in the trash with the dog poop. It doesn’t mean anything. What means *everything* is knowing Jesus Christ, and his amazing grace.

It may sound like I’m being a bit critical of theological thinking and doctrine. I’m not against theology. Theology informs my ongoing reading of the Bible, and my reading of the Bible informs my theology and my preaching every Sunday, and my practice of pastoral work and daily living. But I’m with Paul in that I prefer *experiences with Christ over knowledge about Christ*. Because...

Experience *also* informs my theology, and, because I know that an overindulgence in theology can lead to idolatry (when we love our theology more than we love God), and, it can lead to feeling self-righteous about our positions on

things and our accomplishments, like Paul once did. Which he says he's tossed into the garbage.

There is a short ancient Celtic tale, from a monastery in Ireland: an older brother/monk died and was interred in the wall of the monastery, as is customary. Two days later the brothers heard a noise coming from inside his grave, and discovered that their brother had been resurrected. They opened it, and asked him: "Tell us what heaven is like!" "Well," said the resurrected brother, "it's very different than what our theology says it is. And, there are people there you'd be surprised to find out are there; and there are people not there who it was assumed would be." The brothers frowned, then took him, put him back in his crypt, and sealed it up! Because their doctrine said it was one way and that had to be right. Even someone raised from the dead didn't change their beliefs.

That story reminds me of one of Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees, who were bragging about having Moses and Abraham as their ancestors. And Jesus told them, even if those guys came alive and spoke to you in person, you still wouldn't believe them because you're so stuck in your beliefs and thinking.

In the early church, the early disciples were called followers of the Way (as you heard in the first reading from Acts). It was all about practice, and living out what they were experiencing together. By the second century the early church had created a simple document called “The rule of faith,” which is ironically named (it’s a misnomer) because it wasn’t about rules at all. Actually, there was only one rule: follow the Way of Jesus! “The rule of faith” was a simple set of *practices*, based on the basic teachings of Jesus, that they agreed to live by together. It included things like love of neighbor; practicing hospitality; forgiveness, and love of enemies; gathering for regular prayer and teaching together, and acts of generosity based on the generosity of Jesus. In other words, they were encouraged to have *experiences* with the risen Christ, and gather for support in their community for living according to the Way of Jesus. The community part of this is important, because experience needs to be interpreted, and sometimes tested. That’s where Ananias comes in, and the Way-followers in Saul’s story from Acts. And the faith community in *our* story(ies), is important to help us interpret, and celebrate, our experiences of the risen Christ. Whether that community is a small group, a Bible study, a gathering around the table in the social hall after worship.

I'll repeat what the great poet Robert Frost once said: that a poem begins with a lump in the throat. Likewise, I believe that good theology begins with a lump in the throat. Or a blinding light along a road, an experience of grace, a Holy Spirit assurance, a struggle with an illness, or an untimely turn of events in life that somehow draws us closer to God; or a moment when you are stopped in your tracks because of coming alive while standing in a forest or going for a walk on a blustery fall day, or watching a spider weaving a web, or looking at the mountains, or music that connects you to eternity, or, when you're reading the Bible and a verse or phrase leaps out of the page at you and speaks to you so clearly and directly it's as if someone actually spoke the words to you audibly.

In our passage from Philippians this morning Paul talks about the "surpassing value" of knowing Christ. Why is that? What makes knowing Christ so great? So much so that Paul wants to toss his accomplishments in the trash?

Well, simply put, it's grace. God's amazing grace. That's what got a hold of Saul, who became Paul. And that's what kept hold of him throughout his life. And that is the same amazing grace that holds us, and is continuously offered to us, without fail. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul talks about the riches of God's grace in Christ, that God has a storehouse of grace that never gets empty.

I think of Paul's experience, and perhaps our experience, this way: Jesus came to reveal to the world who God truly is—correcting our false conceptions of God. Namely, that God is not the distant and vindictive, judgmental God whose greatest joy every day is to catch you messing up. That's what leads to bad religion (like Paul had, as a Pharisee). Jesus shows us, rather, that God is our loving heavenly father who is full of mercy and compassion, whose greatest joy is to be in loving communion with us. Jesus reveals to us who God truly is, correcting our false conceptions of God.

**And,** Jesus reveals to us who **we** truly are, confronting our false conceptions of our selves. Christ tells us who we truly are. Christ is the one who wants to give us our identity, our worth, our significance, and our true security. That is a big part of what Paul is talking about in his letters, and especially in this little line where Paul says, "Christ has made me his own." So, there is a sense of Paul coming to know his worth in God's eyes.

And this got me thinking, what is our worth? Worth is whatever a person is willing to pay for something. Something might be very precious to one person, but not worth a dime to someone else.

Snap together K-car... not worth a nickel at a garage sale, but priceless to me, because Heidi used it at my ordination service 30 years ago as a children's message: "The church is like a car. And who is driving the car?" Heidi asked. Kids reply: "The pastor!" Heidi: "Wrong! If that was true, we'd all be lost, and end up in a ditch. Jesus is the leader of the church, driving the car. So, the pastor, along with Session, is more like, say, the steering wheel." This is worth a lot to me, as it sits on the shelf in the office because it reminds me that I am not in charge; I am not in control. Control is an illusion. I, and we all, need to look to Jesus for direction. What's it worth? Not a nickel to anyone else, but worth everything to me.

Similarly, at an auction: One bidder, "That painting isn't worth \$5 to me." The winning bidder paid \$550 for it. Worth is whatever someone is willing to pay, or give, for something.

So, what are we worth—you and I? Well, what did God pay, so to speak? What did God give? A whole lot. Not just a whole lot... everything! The God of the universe came to earth in human form and, to use Paul's words from last week's passage in Philippians, "He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross," for the sake of solidarity with humanity and for our salvation.

What more could God have done? He gave his very life, paying the highest price. Which means... you and I have unsurpassable worth. You could not have more worth in God's sight. Right here, right now, you have all the worth, the significance, and value, and love you could ever have.

Now, it could be that some of you could be thinking to yourself: this doesn't ring true to me right now; this doesn't seem quite right. It sounds a little touchy-feely, too fluffy. Wrath of God sounds a little more like it to me. Or, it's just too good to be true. Or, if you're like me, maybe I believe it up here (head) but it's hard to accept it in here (heart).

Maybe I believe it's true for someone else, but it isn't true for me—or if it is true, only in small bits and pieces, once in a while. And we may have these disqualifying voices in our head (voices from the past, or someone that just got in there and has been living in there rent free) and those voices have been telling you, “Nah, not you”—and somehow that has become our self-talk: Not me. I'm not worth it. I have to try harder, do more, be good—or be better. I gotta earn the stars and stickers! I'm just too broken to be loved in that way.

And we have these lies in our head that say, it counts for someone else, but not for me. We need to hear the truth spoken over us once again, that we are of unsurpassable worth and value to God.

Jesus tells us the truth about who God is, and he tells us the truth about who we are. And this is what got the apostle Paul. He says, I've given up everything for knowing Christ—I don't dwell on the past; I press on, and look ahead. As I like to put it, the windshield is bigger than the rearview mirror. The things that don't matter are lost. And now, it's all gain.

In Luke 12—that whole “do not worry about your life...” passage, when we're assured that God feeds the birds of the air, and the flowers of the field grow and bloom, and Jesus assures us that everything is taken care of, including you and me. That passage. At the end of it, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid; it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Okay, wow. Talk about gain. Talk about worth and value and significance! In a way it takes us back to the garden in Genesis—it's all gift, it's all yours, it's all good. So we can go forth unburdened, with an airy, spacious lightness of being.

We'll continue this conversation next Sunday when we look at the first half of Philippians 4...