

“Losing Everything”
March 25, 2007

John 12:1-8
Philippians 3:4b-14

There are times when the absurdity of church and Christianity and the Bible gets downright overwhelming. This last week has been one of those times. Literally in the midst of life and death, in the midst of hearing yet again that many of you find the Bible alienating at best and offensive at worst, and in the midst of political clashes over war and peace, global warming, and fired U.S. Attorneys, I’ve been spending my time learning about the tax consequences of various church activities and listening for the Word of God in what some 1st century curmudgeon named “Paul” had to say to some people in the city of Philippi. . . . It really can all seem absurd.

With all the things going on in this community and in this world, why have I had my head and my heart buried in some ancient text, and why am I up here, getting ready to talk with you about it? “Why?” indeed.

In many places across the globe – in Asia and Africa, in Latin American and Louisiana, and in Sonoma and Sonoma County, this book [the Bible] is the *Word of God*, plain and simple. Whether it’s understood as having been written by Moses, David, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul or as having been written by many different communities over a span of centuries, this is the *Word of God*, period.

But in the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, in the year 2007, things just aren’t that straightforward. I stand here, week after week, trying to make sense of what I encounter in this book in the context of what I encounter in this community and this world – *and* trying to make sense of what I encounter in this community and this world in the context of this book. Week after week, I stand here, uncertain about whether and how much you might care what this book has to say about our world and our lives.

I stand here with some uncertainty, but I also stand here with confidence about at least two things. The first is that I’ve been called – by God – to try to name my experiences of the Holy at work in the world, in you, and *in and through this book* and then offer what I find to you, here in this place. I also stand here confident that I do not and cannot know where God is going to take you and me and us, as I try to be faithful to that calling.

So, with both uncertainty and confidence, I start with this book . . . and a simple question: “What’s the point of paying attention to something that was written so long ago?” Or, to put it more bluntly, “Why bother?”

One reason to bother is that this [the Bible] contains the stories, hopes, dreams, and truth of people who have encountered God in unexpected ways and in unexpected places and who say, as Jacob did outside the city of Haran, “Surely God is in this place – in this *life*, and we did not know it.” These are the stories of people not so different from you and me – a mix of good and bad, courage and fear, generosity and greed – and they are telling us that God is in the midst of it all. They are urging us to open our eyes and let ourselves see the Holy Presence in our lives and our world. Our ancestors in faith cannot describe just what that Presence will look like to us, but they can and do offer us what they learned on *their* journey with God to help us with ours.

Please don't misunderstand, I don't for one moment deny that this book has been abused and misused, taken up as a weapon to harm instead of a balm to heal. But, in this, my dear friends, it is no different from anything else in human life.

Still, over the centuries, even as it has been misused, it has also been hallowed – sanctified – made holy – by the tears and prayers of the lost, the betrayed, and the oppressed, who have heard the voice of God in it saying, “You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you.” It has also been hallowed by the repentance of the betrayer and the oppressor, who have heard the voice of God in it saying, “Woe to you who are rich and full,” and who have allowed God to soften their hearts and turn their lives to love. It has been hallowed in all the times and all the places where people who are treated as less than the sacred creations that they are have heard through the stories and verses of this book that they are beloved of God and that God is at work to bring healing and blessing, justice and peace into their lives and into all of creation.

So this week and every week, I come to this book, asking to hear a word of truth. I come, hoping to hear a word that takes us deeper into the heart of God, a word through which we might encounter both the fullness of God's blessing and the depth of God's grief over the violence we continue to do to ourselves, to each other, and to all of creation.

Turning, then, to this morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, hoping for a word of God, I found that Paul, being Paul, has given us *many* words from which to choose! In this passage, he is classic, almost stereotypic Paul, writing about circumcision, flesh, righteousness, suffering, and resurrection from the dead. But underneath those familiar – and perhaps off-putting – words, what is God offering us this morning? What glimpse of the glory and the call of God in our lives is Paul trying to help us see?

One glimpse, a glimpse for this morning, comes in these words: “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” I have lost everything, Paul says, and consider it all worthless garbage, so that I may come to know the God whom I encounter through Jesus.

Paul first reminds the Philippians of all the reasons he has to think of himself as important, as worthy of God's blessing. “Circumcised on the eighth day, 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 is telling us that because of the privileges of his birth, the devotion he has demonstrated to God, and the work he has done, he was confident about his importance and his acceptability to God. If I were to make similar, foolhardy claims about myself, I might stand here before you and say, “Born a Southerner of Southerners. Born into a family of college graduates, trained in history, trained in law. As to academic accomplishment, *magna cum laude* and winner of the Thayer prize. As to professional accomplishment, an assistant state attorney general. As to accomplishment in the kitchen, a great baker of muffins and scones.” That's what my empty boasting might sound like. What would be your own way of expressing this sort of self-centered identity?

With his self-description, Paul is telling the Philippians that by the standards of the world, he has much to be proud of, much to boast about . . . and then he tells them that he considers all of that worthless rubbish. He considers it all rubbish, because, through his encounters with the living Christ, he has come to understand that he cannot *earn* God's blessing, he cannot *prove* his worth through his own accomplishments, and he cannot establish his spiritual superiority through his own self-righteousness.

So all the ways we puff ourselves up or, perhaps more accurately, all the ways we try to convince ourselves that we're important, that we matter, that we *count* in the great scheme of things ... all these things, according to Paul, come to nothing and need to be left behind as trash. In a culture (and a congregation) of high achievers, I suspect this message may itself seem absurd; it may seem like an invitation into giving up or simply being a slacker.

But that's not what Paul – or God – is up to. No, the word this morning is that we do not *earn* God's blessing, we do not have to *prove* our worth. From the very beginning of our existence, we are blessed and beloved of God, worthy of love, and called to be loving servants of our Creator. Our blessedness and worth do not come as a reward for our hard work; they come as the gifts of a loving God. But when we forget this sacred truth, when we fail to allow it to be our center and our guide, whatever we do and whatever we accomplish is, ultimately, hollow and may indeed be destined for the trash heap. If we do not allow love and grace to be the center and source of what we do, our accomplishments will be no more than a tiny fraction of what they could be, if only they flowed from our willingness to hear and follow God's call in our lives.

This is the reality of God that Paul encountered through Christ Jesus. As Paul writes earlier in his letter to the Philippians (and here he is using one of the earliest Christian hymns), Jesus lived in union with God but did not see this union as something to be grasped and used for his own purposes. Instead, Jesus emptied himself to serve and love humanity as God loves humanity. In Jesus, God was – and still is – calling us to live the truth that we are here because we have been loved into being by a God who asks us to join in the holy work of transforming creation into a world of justice and peace, compassion and joy.

There are as many ways to join in that holy work as there are people. Some ways are very public, through all the steps great and small we can take to bring an end to war in the world and an end to violence in the home. Some ways are less noticeable but no less holy, as people go through their days answering God's call to be teachers, healers, farmers, artists, or engineers. Yet other ways can be nearly imperceptible, as people surrender to the longing in their hearts to find a path of peace and reconciliation in their own broken families and broken communities.

What matters is not *what* we do but *from what* do we do it. Do we live our lives trying to prove our worth, telling ourselves and whoever will listen that we have worked for and earned what we think of as the good life, what we think of as God's blessings? Or do we, instead, live knowing that being created, claimed, and called by God is the greatest blessing of all? Do we live our lives knowing that we are created by a God who loves us and longs for us to join in the joy and the pain of creating true *Shalom*?

I describe this holy calling as joining in God's healing work of *Shalom*. Paul described it as the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. How do *you* describe it? More importantly, how do you *live* it? How do *you* respond to God's love and blessing?

In the months and years ahead, may we all respond with love, with joy, and with a willingness to lose everything in surrender to the God who calls us into life and service.

Amen.

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