

sermon-3/21/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“A Matter of Priorities”
Phil. 3:2-14

Jesus, in talking about those who try to protect their lives instead of being willing to risk them by trying to be faithful disciples, said, “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” Jesus was reminding his disciples that the journey of faith is all about priorities. We make choices every day that speak volumes about what we give the highest priority in our lives.

That is basically the theme of our Philippians passage for today. Paul, too, has made choices that reflect what he gives the highest priority in his walk of faith. Priorities and choices are very appropriate things to think about during Lent.

What is most important to you in your life? Does your daily schedule reflect that? Does where you spend your money reflect that? Are your actions consistent with what you say you value? All those are good Lenten questions.

They are also good questions for any church community to explore. One commentator, wondered what it would be like for a church to use this passage in Philippians as the basis of their mission statement. She said, suppose a church took Phil. 3:10 as their mission statement: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” She asks, “What aspects of that congregation’s ministry would stay and what would go?” That would be a very interesting discussion!

In the same way, we, too, might want to ask ourselves what we might need to give up or leave behind to better reflect what we say is our top priority in life. That would assume, of course, that we could name our top priority. Maybe that is why some churches emphasize giving up something for Lent. Often it is something frivolous, like chocolate, or playing a favorite video game. What if we all took this to another level and talked about what we would need to give up, or at least give less time to, in order for our lives to better reflect our top priorities? That might be a nice exercise to try next Lent.

Paul, in Philippians, sees Jesus as modeling giving up something in order to be faithful to his call. In chapter two he writes, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. . .”

We might quibble with his Christology there, but this notion of emptying oneself of all that would get in the way of being faithful to God’s call in our life, is something worth contemplating.

Paul said he did that in his life. In our passage he names all of his past credentials: a Hebrew, born of Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, a Pharisee, as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Those were pretty impressive credentials. He says he is giving them all up as things that would give him status.

He names them because he was taking on some in the church at Philippi who were lording their credentials over others at the church. They were saying a Christian had to be a good Jew first before they could call themselves a true Christian. They pushed circumcision among other things.

This obviously upset Paul. We know this by the strong language he uses for them. He calls them “dogs” and “evil workers.” He then goes on to say all the things they held in high esteem, he has them all in spades, far more than they. But, Paul says, they are all like rubbish compared to knowing Christ. That last phrase is actually the strongest one of all. The word in Greek translated “rubbish” here is actually the word for poop! All those credentials his antagonists pride so much are just a bunch of poop!

Paul is not being anti-Semitic here. He was still a Jew, as was Jesus. He was just trying to make clear the life of faith is one of priorities, and ultimately one of grace. We don't earn our worth in life because of our credentials, because of what we have accomplished. Our worth is a free gift from God. All those things he accomplished, all the ways he tried to please God by following the law blamelessly, finally seemed insignificant to him.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts this in modern-day terms. She writes, “Meeting his quotas kept him from questioning what the numbers meant.” When we are locked into trying to measure up to what the culture deems important, we don't have the time or energy to step back and ask the really important questions. What is my life all about? Whom am I trying to please? In the long run, does my obsessively trying to please others or move up the ladder of success mean all that much?

It is not that we don't have to work hard if we accept God's grace. It is just that we work for a different reason and with a whole lot more freedom. Paul talks about pressing forward trying to reach the goal in his faith. It looks like he is saying gaining Christ is all on his shoulders. It is more of a paradox.

One commentator puts it this way, “We may never come close to the mountain top that is Christ, yet we have already arrived because he has made us his own.” The life of faith is all about pressing on toward the goal of the call of God in Christ, but we do so in an unanxious way. We are free from the oppressive demands of trying to measure up to some standard so that we have worth. As another scholar put it, we can seek Christ because we have already been found. We can try to know God because we have already been known. It is a paradox, a wonderful paradox.

Lent is a time to figure out what is truly important in our lives and then focus on that, give that our best energies. It is a time to let go of the past and old ways of gaining self-worth that are ultimately oppressive and unforgiving. It is a time to press on toward the only goals worth our best efforts, but to press on in unanxious ways. We don't have to worry about the results of our efforts. They have already been determined. We can only try our best and let it go.

May this Lent be a rich time for all of us in our spiritual journey toward God, toward knowing the power of the resurrection. Amen