

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 21, 2010
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:8-14
Luke 20:9-19

As I read the apostle Paul's words to the Philippians this week, I could not help but think of the elder brother from last week's Gospel lesson of the parable of the lost sons. Both Paul and the elder brother were prone to rely on their stellar obedience to external rules as a means to gain acceptance or favor.

Paul admits as much in the verses just prior to our epistle text this morning. He says, "if anyone should have confidence in himself, it should be me. I was born into a pureblooded Jewish family. I was a member of the Pharisees, a zealot among zealots, where not one single blemish could be found on my record."

The elder brother in last week's parable tried to make the same claim, when he said to his father: "all these years I've slaved for you and there was not one single time where I didn't do everything you asked!"

Paul discovered, however, the central problem behind all his human effort to achieve favor with God, and his insight should not be lost on us this morning. *The problem with focusing on human effort -- no matter how flawless or meticulous -- is that it actually prevents us from experiencing a relationship with God because we end up trying to become our own savior.*

So Paul chooses a different path. He says: “I no longer count on my own goodness or ability to obey God’s law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith. As a result, *I can really know* Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.” [3:9-10]

Paul has traded in his attempt to save himself for an opportunity to pursue a relationship with Jesus. The opportunity to have this relationship with Jesus becomes so important for Paul that it becomes both the *defining feature* and the *dominant aspiration* of his life.

I want us to examine these two characteristics of Paul’s relationship with Christ in the time we have remaining this morning.

First, let’s look at how Paul’s relationship with Christ becomes the *defining feature* of his life. One of the things you notice here is that for Paul, relationship with Christ is not about *information* as much as it is about *participation*. Paul describes his faith to the Philippians by saying:

...as a result, I can really know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I can learn what it means to suffer with him, sharing his death, so that, somehow, I can experience the resurrection from the dead! [vv. 10-11]

This language is very experiential. It reflects a shared life, where Paul is somehow able to experience in his own life some of the things that marked Jesus’ life. The shape of Paul’s life begins to take on the shape of Jesus’ life, which was cruciform.

It was a journey of death and resurrection. It was a journey marked by sacrificial love and by suffering. And this journey doesn't merely involve learning *about* Jesus' life; it involves *participation* in Jesus' life.

When Paul speaks of sharing in Jesus' suffering, he probably recalls moments in his own life where he felt as though he was being placed down into the refiner's fire. Perhaps he recalls when he was shipwrecked and afraid for his life. Or perhaps he remembers when he was beaten and threatened for preaching the gospel. Perhaps he remembers when the churches he started had difficulty or wandered away from his guidance.

And I can assure you this morning that if you desire to be a follower of Jesus, you will walk the same road that Paul did, because following Jesus means *sharing* in Jesus' life, not merely learning about Jesus' life. There will be times when your life will seem less like a growth process and more like a death struggle. There will be times when you will be tried and refined in the fires of God's holy love.

Several years ago a woman made an appointment with a Silversmith so that she could watch him do his work. As she watched, the Silversmith held a piece of silver over the fire and began heating it.

The craftsman said to her, “in order to refine silver, you have to hold the silver precisely in the middle of the fire where the flames are hottest, so that all of the impurities can be burned away.”

The woman was curious, so she asked: “Do you have to be present and sit with the silver in front of the fire the entire time you are refining it?”

His answer: “Yes, I do. It’s important that I keep my eye on the silver the entire time it is in the fire. If the silver is left in the fire a moment too long, it will be destroyed.”

The woman sat in silence, thinking. Then she asked: “So how do you know when the time is just right, when the silver is fully refined?”

The Silversmith smiled and said: “I always know the silver is fully refined when I see my image in it.”

For Paul, his relationship with Christ was the defining feature of his life. Everything he did, every goal he had, every success he enjoyed, was measured against his desire to share his life with Christ.

But knowing Jesus in this deep way was not merely the defining characteristic of Paul’s life. Knowing Jesus also became Paul’s *dominant aspiration*. Paul did not merely want to know Jesus, as important as that was. Paul wanted to know Jesus better *today* than he did *yesterday*.

He says:

No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven. [vv. 13-14]

Using the image of the runner in a race, Paul recognizes that his relationship with Christ is just that -- a relationship. It is constantly growing, changing, evolving. He is constantly growing, changing, evolving. And for any relationship to be healthy, it must be forward-looking and not bound by the chains of regret.

That is because you cannot aspire to something in the past. You can only look back on it, and often times we do so with regret. Paul refuses to play that game. He would be the first to tell you that there were things in his past that he deeply regretted, things he would change if he could, but he cannot.

But his relationship with Jesus is the dominant aspiration of his life. So he makes a decision. He draws a line in the sand. He says, "I haven't reached the finish line in my race just yet. I haven't arrived. And I know I can't move forward in my race by running backward. So I'm going to keep running forward as hard as I can. I'm going to get closer to Jesus today than I did yesterday. I'm going to stick out my chest and press ahead toward the finish line.

When Paul uses the word "perfect" here to say that he is not perfect, we look at that and say, "well, of course you're not perfect, Paul. No one is." But that's because we understand the word "perfection" in the absolute sense. We view

perfection very statically, as if something is so complete that it is utterly incapable of improvement or growth.

But that's not the New Testament understanding of the term "perfect." The term "perfect" as Paul uses it here means "end," or "goal." In the New Testament, something was "perfect" when it achieved the desired end or goal for which it was made.

Obviously, Paul knows he is not perfect in an absolute sense. But he also knows that he was made to have a relationship with Christ, to have his life deeply drawn into the life of Christ. He was made so that the image of his Creator might be clearly seen in him. So this relationship has now become the dominant aspiration of Paul's life. It's the only race he has found worth entering, and he is determined to run it and finish strong.

On this fifth Sunday in our Lenten journey, Paul's life and experience can inspire us and challenge us at the same time. For each of us, like Paul, has something that is the defining feature of our lives. Each of us has a dominant aspiration, something that internally burns within us and propels us forward.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, I would remind you that this table is not merely a place where you "remember" Jesus -- it is a place where you *encounter* him, through these tangible symbols of bread and wine.

So come with faith. Come seeking not merely to know *about* him, but to know him. Receive the grace he offers. Then rise up and go forth, with your eyes firmly on what lies ahead, and the work he is yet to do in your life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.