

18th Sunday of Pentecost

October 4, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Second Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14

[Paul writes:] ^{4b}If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised 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; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More 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 ⁹and 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. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not 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. ¹³Beloved, 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, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46

[Jesus said to the people:] ³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he



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was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

Paul had thought he that he had achieved perfection in his life. He was a Pharisee like no other; blameless under the Law. His bloodline was pure in the fact that he was from the tribe of Benjamin, one of the original tribes of Israel, born a Hebrew from Hebrew parents. He was also a persecutor of heretics, hunting down followers of Jesus and bringing them to trial before the Sanhedrin to be sentenced to death. Yes, Paul was a powerful Pharisee, a member of the Aristocracy, and a hero among many Jews. His life was, or so he thought, perfect.

But then Paul encountered Jesus on his way to Damascus and went from perfection to pure vulnerability in the fact that Paul could no longer visibly see. He required help in order to finish his journey and to see again. This turned Paul's world upside down. Before Paul knew it, he had become a follower of Jesus and he had a new mission, to proclaim Christ to his Jewish brothers and sisters as well as to anyone else who would listen. But Paul's journey was far from perfect. Most of the time when he went into a synagogue to argue that Jesus was the Son of God and the true risen Christ, Paul was met with great opposition and resistance. Paul was usually thrown out for his teachings. Sometimes, Paul was even driven out of towns. Now, while Paul did establish many gentile churches in different cities, it is clear from his letters that the people struggled to follow Paul's teachings on how to be followers of Christ and in community together. Plus, eventually Paul was arrested, thrown in prison, and sentenced to death for following Jesus. A far from perfect life.

This far from perfect life is something that Paul actually perceived as a gift. As he states in our Philippians reading this morning: "...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..." This is Paul's way of telling the Philippians that his relationship with Christ Jesus and doing the will of Christ through mission is more valuable than what was his perceived perfection. And even though his journey has been bumpy at times, it has been worth it because of growing in relationship with Christ and growing in faith in Christ as the risen Son of God.

There are some things that we Lutheran followers of Jesus can learn from Paul's story and his letter today. The first thing is that there is nothing more important in this world than knowing Jesus and being in relationship with him. Paul states that clearly when he called all of his accomplishments in his former life, his life before Christ, rubbish. This is good news for us because it reminds us that we are not valued by what we have or have not accomplished in life. God does not take a look at our resumes in order to determine our worth. God does not take an accounting of how much money we have, how big our home may be, or how much stuff we have accumulated. And God certainly does not care how popular we are, or what rung we may be at on the social ladder. What God cares about is being in relationship with us, having a relationship with us, because we are God's beloved. Like a loving parent or guardian, God will love us whether or not we bring home the trophy.



This good news frees us from the expectations of the world; the ones that often drain us, overwhelm us, and stress us out. Instead of focusing so much on the pressures of impressing others, we are free to focus on experiencing the love of Jesus and learning how to love Jesus in return. What would it look like to begin to let go so that there is more time to just be in loving relationship with Jesus?

Another thing that we can learn from this passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians as well as Paul's story is that following Jesus, our faith life, is a journey that does not reach perfection until our own resurrection. Paul, throughout his journey as a follower of Jesus experienced many hardships as well as many joys, but he experienced both all the way to his death.

There is a false understanding among some circles of Christianity that perfection in faith is not only possible but also the goal. These circles teach that through worship, prayer, and following God's commandments and their community's morals, one can achieve a perfect life. Hmm, aren't those the same values of the Pharisees that Jesus challenged and ridiculed in the gospels?

Thankfully, Paul reminds us that perfection is not the goal nor is it achievable. Our journey as Christians is one that brings all sorts of ups and downs. There are plenty of moments when something happens in our lives that fills us with such faith it feels like God has never been so near to us, but then there are also those moments when God feels quite distant and we begin to wonder and doubt. I'm sure that when Paul had successfully established each church, it felt so affirming to him that he was following the will of Jesus. I'm sure when Paul was sitting in prison there were times when he questioned and doubted what God was doing.

This understanding about our faith journey being far from perfect frees us from having to put up these false fronts to our other fellow Christian neighbors that everything in our lives is perfect. We are free to show the cracks that are present in our faith. We are free to question God, challenge God, even get angry with God. And we are free to do these things because, again, God does not require a perfect faith; God does not measure the amount of faith we have at any given moment. What God cares about is that we are in loving relationship with God. God knows that because of the brokenness of the world, we will never be able to achieve a total perfect faith like Jesus. But that is why God promises eternal life; that is why God promises the goal will be achieved in the resurrection.

The gift of baptism is not the gift of perfection, even though it is the gift of new life in Christ. Instead, Baptism is that which reminds us each and every day that we are God's beloved and God will always forgive our imperfections so that we can continue to do our best each day to love God and love neighbor, knowing we will never be perfect at it.

This understanding that we glean from Paul's letter today lets us know that we are free to be vulnerable in love to each other, for we don't have to show a false perfection in our faith. It also reminds us that all that really matters in this world is to be in loving relationship with Jesus. Knowing that we are God's beloved makes



us perfect in the eyes of God, therefore let us continue to strive for the goal of growing in loving relationship with Jesus.

Amen.

