

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Undeserved: Gains”

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Philippians 3:7-11

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Today, this first Sunday after Easter we are continuing in a series we began last week called “Undeserved,” going through the end of next month. And one thread we’ll be exploring during this time is, in light of the gift and grace of Christ’s resurrection, “How could our life following Jesus be shaped even more by recognizing just how much of it isn’t because of what we earn, deserve, or work for ourselves?” Life in Christ is a life in grace, one that begins with the new life ushered in when he rose from the dead.

During this series, we’re also leading up to the Sunday four weeks from today, May 22, when we’ll celebrate 75 years of ministry at this church. So we’re exploring not just how the grace and life of Christ have blessed us individually, but also collectively as a congregation.

Last week we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord, and we continue to do so, but as we do, we start to ask, okay, so what? Jesus is risen from the dead. Everyone says that’s good news, but why exactly? What impact does that have? What is gained from it?

To explore the “so what,” we go to one of Paul’s letters, written to the church in Philippi from prison.

But whatever things were gain to me, these things I have counted as loss because of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them mere rubbish, so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; if somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:7-11

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Paul was a man who had a lot going for him. He had gained a lot for himself, so he thought. And he a lot more to gain.

He was a rising star in the Jewish world. Every indication, whether written by Paul’s hand or by the account in the Book of Acts, points to Paul having a position of respect among the Pharisees. He was especially zealous for preserving the Jewish faith and pursuing those who would blaspheme against it. He was passionate about it. He was good at it. And then, it would seem, he threw it all away.

Imagine for a moment that you knew Paul in those days, in his early days, that you knew him when. You would have known that he set off one day from Jerusalem on a mission to catch some strange people. These people were strange because they went around claiming that a rabble rouser, who had been crucified, was actually alive and, furthermore, was the Christ, the Messiah.

Then the next you hear of it after some time passes is through some whispers from Damascus: that this same Paul had in fact started preaching the very message he had gone to squash. Everything he had gained up to that point, every rung up the ladder, every bit of influence, all his passion, all his talent, he had thrown it all away, wasted on this flash in the pan cult proclaiming the nonsense that a crucified man was, in fact, alive and, furthermore, king.

About thirty years later, it is thought, Paul sits in a prison for still proclaiming that same message and writes this message to his friends in the Macedonian city of Philippi. He speaks of all those gains he had made in his life, every bit of progress, everything he had to fall back on and be proud of. And concerning that success he writes: “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 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 and be found in him.”

Clearly, this man has lost his wits. For the lion’s share of his adult life, he has traipsed around the Roman world, peddling this fiction of a crucified Messiah, and now he rots in a prison. All the while he still holds to the delusion that whatever gains he had made all those years ago, whatever they might have been, were a loss to him, even though any reasonable person would have looked at his life and said that things had instead gone from bad to worse ever since.

And if you had known Paul somehow all those years ago, you’re faced with an inescapable question: why did he do it?

He wasn’t alone in doing it. Gatherings of these so-called Christians seemed to be popping up everywhere, and for them, Jesus rising from the dead was a gamechanger. They weren’t gathered by status or social affinity, but instead by one thing: that this man Jesus had been crucified but had risen and was the Christ. These communities would say and believe and practice some pretty strange things, enough at the very least to earn themselves some weird looks from friends and family and at worst to earn themselves a bullseye on their back in the eyes of the Jewish or Roman authorities.

Unlike later centuries when prominence within the Christian world or a profession of Christian faith might be a ticket to riches or power—just take a look at later Roman emperors, or the Renaissance popes, or disgraced televangelists—the sort of steps taken by Paul and those like him simply didn’t compute. It’s very hard to find an ulterior motive here like money or power, simply because gains like that weren’t on offer for those who believed what they did. Quite the opposite. It was a surefire way to lose what you had.

So one has to ask, why did they do it?

It must have something to do with what Paul wrote in these words to his friends in Philippi: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (v. 8). For some reason Paul considered this message, this knowledge of this man Jesus as the Christ—

something he did not earn for himself—as being far and away more valuable and more important than everything else he had worked for and gained in his life.

Even if you could think he was delusional, clearly he considered this message, this knowledge, more valuable. Even if you could think all those early Christians were all delusional, clearly they agreed with what Paul says: to “regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Something in them had changed.

Something had changed, and it had something to do with knowing this Christ. Paul says it again in v. 10, only this time he speaks of it not as something he’s already accomplished or already knows, but something he hopes for, something he wants, and something that he cannot earn for himself. He writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” Here Paul is telling us not just what *had* changed him but what he hopes to continue going after. It is this knowledge of Christ and the power of his resurrection that drives him forward, that gives him purpose.

Some of you might be thinking at this point, hey, I know things too, preacher, but they don’t make me act like an idiot. Like, when I was in high school, I had to learn the opening lines of *Canterbury Tales* in Middle English, and I still know them. I know them cold. [And this is the point when I’m tempted to put Mark through the torment of reading Middle English, but I’m restraining myself.] But the fact that I know those opening lines is not a driving force in my life. It did not change me in any profound way.

Is that you think of “knowing Jesus”? Be honest now. Does knowing Jesus fall into the same category as those opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*. It’s something we know. It’s something maybe we learned long ago. Or something we’re half familiar with and are willing to assent to. It’s something we can recite.

For example, let’s try it out. I say, he is risen. And you say, *he is risen indeed*. There, see? Many of us know it. But how many of us *know* it? How many of us know it in the way that Paul is talking about? How many of us know it and consider it of greater value than anything else that has *ever* happened for us? How many of us know it in a way that it has changed the very trajectory of our lives in a fundamental way, regarding everything else as loss?

After all, what kind of knowledge could be so valuable, so earth-shattering that it could possibly lead us to drop everything?

About fifty years ago, a comedy came out called *It’s a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*. It kinda, sorta got a remake about fifteen years in a movie called *Rat Race*, but it wasn’t a very good remake so we’ll stick with the original. Basic premise of the movie: a fugitive from the law is speeding along a curvy highway and crashes. An assortment of folks pass by the crash and stop to try to help him. They’re too late to save him as he soon passes away, but they’re not too late for him to tell them about the location of hundreds of thousands of dollars buried far away.

At first they try to say, let us all calmly drive down there together and we can split anything we find. But pretty soon, that turns into everyone for themselves, and the movie is basically a big race to the spot where the money is buried.

Now, every metaphor fails on some level, and this one fails on multiple ones. First off, knowing Christ is not like a race to a bag full of riches, nor is seeking Christ this cutthroat game of beating everyone else. But at least in the sense that ordinary people learning something, knowing something, and that knowledge causes them to drop everything, to leave behind whatever it was they were heading towards, and to seek after this instead, this is in some semblance what Paul is talking about when he says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

There is something about knowing the risen Jesus that changes things. It’s something we can’t earn, and that makes it different than nearly everything else we might seek after in this world. It’s more than reciting just it, it’s more than just mindless assent, it’s knowing him. And if that is not a change you have felt in your own heart, I pray that you will.

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