

“TAKING OUT THE TRASH” PHILIPPIANS 3:3b-14 LENT 5

What are the things in your life that you value the most...the things that you consider most important...the things that give you the most satisfaction? While I am sure that just from among those here today I would get a pretty large variety of answers, I think can say with confidence that many people would answer those questions with things like...

- **Family**—my husband or wife, my children, my parents, brothers or sisters...
- **Friends**—people who I trust...who care about me...with whom I can be myself...
- **House**—the home I am buying and have worked so hard to make *mine*...
- **Job**—place where I feel I have worth and do something valuable...
- **Football**, or baseball or golf or bowling or craft night...things that are fun...
- **Faith**: at least most of us here would surely list our faith and church high on the list.

In today's Second Lesson in his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul talks about those things in *his* life that he had counted to be most valuable and most important—particularly when it came to assuring his standing before God. It turns out that most of them had to do with status that was his by birth or by the accomplishments on his resume. He said he was “confident in the flesh,” evidently figuring his birth into a family of prominent Roman citizens and his circumcision into the Jewish faith was a guarantee of acceptance. He had taken on his role as a persecutor and tormentor of the early church as a merit badge that would serve him well in the sight of God. Most of all he had fooled himself into thinking that his keeping of God's law had been without fault! As far as Paul was concerned his resume before God stood up to anyone's.

Paul's sense of well being and his assurance of his worth in God's sight came from his achievements and his faithfulness to God's law. *We* can identify with that feeling. We too do our best to follow God's commandments, and know that we certainly do a better job at it than many other people, and, frankly, we would like credit for it!

The result is that for many people things like good grades on report cards, trophies for winning the championship, nice clothes, a beautiful home, a successful business or good income all become symbols that we think proclaim to others God's approval of our faith or good works. God *must* be giving us all of these things as rewards for our commitment to him! The trouble is that when we begin thinking that way those things all begin to blot out the cross...why it was necessary...what God accomplished there.

As Paul looked back at what lay behind him in his life, he realized that his former investments were worth less than he thought. In fact, in the light of the resurrection, Paul acknowledges that his former confidence in the flesh was misplaced, even futile. Now that he knows a value that surpasses (betters, leaves in the dust) all those things he used to think were so important, he throws everything else away...considers all that stuff as useless...as garbage when compared to the value of his relationship with Jesus!

It is important to note that the things Paul now counts as worthless garbage were *not* trash in their own right. They were not wicked or evil things to have had in his possession. Quite the contrary, many were excellent qualities or achievements...the kinds of things for which others applaud you when you accomplish or acquire them...the kinds of things I listed earlier that most of us would list as the things in life we value most.

That is why it is only when Paul stops and thinks, only when he compares those things to the surpassing worth he has found in his relationship to Christ...*that* is when Paul says there is no comparison and those things that used to be so important to him now have no more value than garbage when put next to his relationship with Jesus Christ.

When Paul is writing this he is giving up much more than just a few privileges or trinkets. By becoming a follower of Jesus, he loses his very identity, his parentage, his inheritance. He also lost his position in society and his participation in his Jewish community that was so very important to him. He lost it all—and he doesn't care. He says he regards it **all** as worthless in comparison to what he has gained in Christ!

Paul describes this gain as the “*surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*”—suggesting a closeness that goes beyond just intellectual knowledge. For Paul it was more than just knowing the stories about Jesus. It meant believing in his head and heart that Jesus really was the Savior sent by God! It had to do with feeling the closeness of Christ living within him...loving him, accepting him, forgiving him, caring for him, sending him.

When you really think about it, what Paul is saying here has special meaning for us, because of all the Apostles, Paul's situation is most like ours. Paul did not know Jesus in the flesh as Peter James and John and the rest of the twelve did. Paul had not participated in the glory days of Jesus' ministry with all of the miracles and healings and exorcisms...all of the people crowding around to see and hear him. Nor did Paul see, even from afar, the terrible humiliation Jesus received at his arrest and trials and the horrible death he died when he was crucified. Nor had he experienced the joy and wonder at the empty tomb.

What he *is* claiming, however, is the authority of his own experience of the Risen Lord in **his** life...an experience that came directly to him on the road to Damascus at the very moment he was so violently opposing him. That is all we can claim as well...the Risen Lord coming to us in the splash of water at baptism...in the crunch of bread or the taste of wine at his Supper...or in the gentle touch of a friend who shares God's love and forgiveness when we need it most. That is all, but it is enough to know that this presence of Christ in our life has more significance eternally than a good feeling for a couple of hours or a couple of days or even a couple of months or years...enough to know that this presence of Christ has the power to change us **forever!**

So, because of that, Paul presses toward his goal, what he calls *the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” This call of God is to no longer be content to participate in the pleasures and values of this world in which we live. Now we are called upward to be joined to the life of God lived through Jesus ...participating even in his death and resurrection. This is a call that will sometimes lead **to** suffering and **through** suffering, but it is a call that leads also to an end in heaven with Christ instead of in hell with Satan!

Isaiah, in today's First Lesson said it this way: “*Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.*” He said that to a people—the Jews—whose very religion and life was based on remembering God's actions in history (The Exodus from slavery in Egypt, the covenant at Sinai, the gift of the Promised Land, etc.). What Isaiah was saying to them in effect was, “You ain't seen nothing yet!” The deliverance of God in the past was spectacular; but a more spectacular deliverance is yet to come! He saved you from slavery in the past...he will save you from **sin and death** in the future.

Perhaps what Isaiah is saying to us in this lesson as Lent is winding down is that our lives need a good spring housecleaning. What kind of sin and disobedience to God is running through them? What divisions and hurts against people are we harboring? What things and people and events have we begun to trust to bring us happiness? What are the things we have put ahead of our trust in God and need to be stacked with our pile of trash instead of being displayed on a shelf? Over these next days we will also feel the release from our guilt...we will experience the incredible peace and contentment that will wash over us as Christ springs alive from the tomb. And in the end, only he will count. **Then** we will be able to count everything else as garbage.