

Reading - Philippians 3:7-11; 4:4-9

I didn't include the 2 verses before our reading today, but I probably should have. Sometimes sermons change over the course of the week and this one has a bit.

In those two verses, Paul lists all the reasons he should be proud of himself. As a pure Israelite, he was full of nationalistic pride. He was proud of his family heritage in the tribe of Benjamin. He was highly educated in the Hebrew Pharisee tradition. He was blameless before the law of God. In his Hebrew zeal, he started his career by trying to destroy the new Christian church.

It was looking like it would be a stellar career. He was sure that the newborn Christian church was a threat to all which he held dear.

And he was determined to crush it. He'd made a pretty good start. Some Christians had been thrown in prison, others even killed.

Then... Jesus got hold of him. Paul was on the road to Damascus where there were more Christians to stomp. In a lightning bolt Jesus showed up and knocked him to the ground. Paul was struck blind. Why do you persecute me, Jesus asked?

That encounter and Paul's experiences with Christians over the next three days changed his life forever.

At the writing of this letter, Paul is probably at the end of his career. He is in prison. He knows he is likely going to face the same fate as Jesus...death at the hands of the Roman government.

And he's good with that.

Because now, all his achievements...all his reasons to brag...all of his education...all of his knowledge...all his self-righteousness...they are rubbish to him, because he has found something better.

Or rather something better found him...Jesus found him. These words from Paul are the words of a man in love...he is in love with Christ. What he now desires most is union with Christ at his very deepest level. He has come to know that the ultimate deepest level of union with Christ will be his own death.

Paul has been through experiences that have nearly killed him several times. But most importantly, Paul has experienced the death of that Pharisee, the one who was so proud to be an Israelite...proud of his family...proud of his knowledge and intelligence.

All that is rubbish...literally the Greek translated as rubbish is excrement...poop. It is all poop compared to what he's found in Christ.

After his conversion on the road to Damascus, union with Christ has been his goal. Through his years as Christ's apostle, through his years of prayer and following the guidance of the Spirit, Paul has gotten glimpses of that resurrection life Jesus promised.

In Christ, he's experienced the freedom of letting go of his own ego. He's experienced the gift of God's power made known, even in his own weakness.

He's learned that what the world so often values is not of lasting value.

He's ready to ride this journey to its end, which he sees as the final fulfillment of Christ's work in him.

That's powerful.

But he loves the Philippians and he wants them...and us... to have those experiences too. He also knows we don't have to wait until we die to experience them, at least in part.

But they aren't experiences we can conjure up on our own. Jesus grabs hold of us, too.

For us to grasp that requires the same kind of death during life Paul experienced. It requires the kind of death during life that the saints and the mystics have experienced...it requires the kind of death during life that the most spiritual people you know have experienced.

That kind of death requires a different focus than the ones we usually have.

It's a kind of focus that's out of reach of our often ego driven mind...what Richard Rohr calls our small self.

The starting point for that focus is centering on Christ's love for us.

I want you to picture someone you have fallen deeply in love with...could be a romantic partner, but doesn't have to be. It could be your newborn baby...or a really dear friend or a parent or sibling. Imagine a time when you've been overwhelmed by a feeling of love when you look at that person. Now close your eyes for a minute... Imagine Jesus looking at you with that kind of love.

That's the sort of contemplative seeing that can bring you closer to that union with Christ. It's a way of seeing that strips away all that we often strive so hard for...because none of that is why Jesus loves us. Jesus loves us just because we are. Jesus loved Paul in spite of Paul's vicious attacks on Jesus' followers. Jesus' love lets nothing stand in the way.

When you feel secure in that kind of love, you really can rejoice in the Lord always...no matter what happens.

In the last couple verses, Paul has some other suggestions to help focus your mind. Paul writes, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

I have to confess I’m a little hesitant here – we are in this time when there’s a lot of division. I think we struggle to even agree on what’s true, what’s honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and so on. I mean I think rap music is pleasing and can be excellent, but I’m guessing many of you don’t.

So what are we to do with this?

I considered just ignoring it. A sermon doesn’t have to cover every bit of the passages we read – in fact they usually don’t. On the other hand, I find myself wondering a bit if it still couldn’t be helpful, somehow, in this divisive time.

I don’t really have this tied up neatly...but here’s a thought.

Paul’s goal...that which Paul is striving for is union with Christ. The thing is, the more we are able to experience union with Christ, the more we are drawn to see that we are in union with each other.

In fact the main point of Paul’s whole letter to the Philippians is about unity of the church. That unity lies in our union with Christ...having the same mind as Christ.

The first thing is to see Jesus as the perfect example of what is true, pure, commendable, honorable, pleasing, just and so on. Maybe you can’t do anything with this list until you’re pretty solidly rooted in Christ’s love for you. If you’re not there at least a little bit, then whatever you think is true, honorable, just, pure and so on may reflect your own ego-driven self more than anything.

It also is important to be rooted in Christ’s teaching and ministry. If your understanding of Christ comes mostly from social media memes, maybe read one of the gospels – I think Luke is the easiest to understand.

Then, if you’re able, try to look at someone else through the eyes of Christ. Maybe especially someone with whom you have strong disagreements. Or even someone you think is bad.

Imagine Jesus looking at them with that same kind of love. What is true in their life that may not be in yours? What would a just world look like for them? What about them might be commendable or honorable, even if you think they're mostly not?

Paul's desire for the Philippians is union with Christ. He knows that union will bring union with each other. We can hear those same words for ourselves.

Divisions in the Christian church today reflect the divisions in our society. Some Christians have chosen to stand for things which are not true, honorable, pure, just, or any of these things.

It all starts and ends with Jesus and his love for us. It begins with seeing that in our inmost being, Christ is there...and that is true for others as well.

In both ourselves and others, the presence of Christ within gets covered up by layers of ego and self-interest. Nonetheless, Christ is there, waiting for us to see.

What might happen if you start every day imagining Jesus looking at you with nothing but love?

Make that your challenge for these challenging times - For a little while every day, Imagine that love. That love of Christ will carry us, when nothing else can.