

Pentecost 21 Year A 2008

Proper 22

Texts: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...Not that I have already achieved this goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” Philippians 3:10a, 12

In this morning’s Epistle we hear Paul telling the congregation at Philippi of his confidence in the message of Jesus. Paul founded this congregation around 50 A.D. and it was one of his favorites. He loved these people deeply and they loved him in return. Paul was in prison, most likely in Rome and he was writing to them to reassure them of his care and concern and to let them know he was all right.

He was also writing to them to let them know that although he was in prison, he was using that situation to further the proclamation of the gospel. He was under a capital charge, he would lose his life in Rome, but he tells them, no matter the circumstances, he was joyful because he knew Jesus and the power of the resurrection. Nothing could take away his joy because what he had learned and what he shared with and in Christ was beyond anything and everything that he had ever known.

Paul wanted to be an example to this congregation. They were experiencing some persecution and he wanted them to look at him and draw strength from his situation. He wanted them to share the joy that he knew, the joy that could not be taken away regardless of the circumstances.

Paul’s concern was that there was a group of Christian Jews who were subverting his message of how one belonged to the family of God. This group was insisting that Gentile Christians accept all of Judaism, including circumcision, before they could be thought of as God’s people.

Paul tells the Philippians that his confidence lay not in his religious pedigree, not in the religious resume he could show off, but only in the faith given to him by Christ. He tells them that if anyone had reason to be confident in “the flesh” (which, by the way, refers not to carnal desires or skin and bones but to worldly attitudes, achievements, and

accolades) he does. Paul was a Jew that could trace his lineage all the way back to the tribe of Benjamin. He was Jew that had been circumcised on the eighth day after birth, not as an adult. He was a Jew that belonged to the group known for being the most knowledgeable about Torah-the Pharisee's. He was a Jew who thought he was preserving the purity of the faith by persecuting the church. He was absolutely blameless in the life he led as a Jew. If anyone had reason to boast about where he came from and how he defended the faith it was Paul.

All of these things are valuable, Paul tells the Philippians. All of these things mattered once. But he was ready to lay all of it aside, was ready to count as a loss his religious pedigree, his reputation, everything, because none of it could compare to knowing Jesus Christ as his Lord.

Paul regards it not only as loss but as "rubbish." The word "rubbish" is really far more mild than what Paul really called it. If you want to know what Paul really said you will have to ask me at coffee hour because the reference is so strong that I can't say it from the pulpit.

"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, 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."

No matter how good Paul, or any of them were, no matter how faithfully they followed all the commands of the law, being in right relationship with God was based not on their efforts but on God's efforts for them on the cross.

And then come these beautiful words, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." Paul knew that believing in God and knowing God were two very different things. In his past life he believed in God, he followed everything a faithful Jew would follow, but he didn't know God, and therein lays a huge difference.

Tony Campolo, a noted American Evangelical pastor tells the story of when he first realized that he believed in God but that he didn't know God.

He says that there was never a day that he didn't believe in God. If you asked him about God he would tell you that he believed in God. He believed that Jesus was God's Son and that Jesus died for him on the cross. He attended church on Sundays and Wednesdays. He was active in all the activities at church, but he came to realize that all these things didn't mean he knew God.

This realization came home to him in a particularly searing way one day in high school. There was a boy by the name of Roger. Roger was different. Roger was the kid everyone loved to make fun of, loved to ridicule. After gym the boys would lie in wait for Roger to come out of the shower and then they would whip him with their wet towels. The teasing escalated to ridicule, ridicule escalated into humiliation and physical threats. Then one day after a particularly demeaning and awful round of taunting which included being pushed into a corner and being urinated on, Roger went up into the attic that night and hung himself.

Campolo states, "I knew I believed in God but I also knew in that moment that I wasn't a Christian. I wasn't a Christian because if I had been a Christian I would have stood up for my friend Roger. Even if they ridiculed me for doing it, I would have been his friend. I knew then that I didn't know Jesus."

This situation came flooding back to Campolo one day many years later, walking down the street in Philadelphia. A bum walked towards to him. Campolo writes: "This guy was as dirty and filthy as anyone could get. He was covered with soot from head to toe. You couldn't believe how messed up he was. He had this huge beard and there was rotted food stuck in the beard. As he approached me, he held out a cup of McDonald's coffee and said, 'Hey mister, want some of my coffee?' I looked at his dirty filthy personhood and said, 'thanks, but that's okay.' And I walked by him. The minute I passed him, I knew I was doing the wrong thing, so I turned around and said, 'Excuse me. I would like some of your coffee.' I took some of his coffee and sipped it and gave it back to him. I said, 'you are being generous. How come you're being so generous today?' And this bum looked at me and he said, "Because the coffee was especially delicious today and I think that when God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people.'

Campolo asked if he could give the bum anything, hoping that the man would ask him for some money. First the man said “no.” Then he said, “Yeah. Yeah. I’ve changed my mind, there is something you can give me. You can give me a hug.” Campolo continues, “As I looked at him, I was hoping for the money! He put his arms around me and I put my arms around him. And as I was in my establishment dress and he in his filthy garb hugged each other on the street, I had the strange awareness that I wasn’t hugging a bum, I was hugging Jesus. I found Jesus in that suffering man.”¹

It is this interchange that convinces Tony Campolo that he now may know Jesus and not simply believe in him. It is for this type of interchange that Paul is ready to toss all of his privilege, all of his wealth, all of his reputation aside for.

It is in this type of interchange that all of us, if we are brave enough to enter it, will come to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection.

This morning’s Epistle asks us point blank, “What are we willing to give up to know Christ and the power of his resurrection?” Are we willing to settle for just believing in God, or are we willing to take the chance, the God-awe-full chance of really knowing him?

If we are willing to take that chance we just might find that all of our privileges of birth and circumstance, all of our affluence, education, and outward appearances, all of those things society tells us are of great value, simply cannot compare with what we find, and what we are given when we come to know Christ by sharing the suffering of another. When we know that we will indeed know the power Christ’s resurrection.

Amen.

¹ Tony Campolo “Knowing God” 30 Good Minutes Program #4104 10/26/97

