

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God; & the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, & innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth & the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

New Testament Lesson—Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 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, & 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. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection & the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not 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. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind & straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Xp Jesus.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is sometimes called the "book of joy." Did you know that? Have you ever heard it called by that name?

As you might expect, the reason is because Paul is heaven-bent (it seems) on being joyful throughout—which is incredible when you remember he was almost certainly behind bars when he wrote it! I mean, you really got to be committed to joy! Right?

And even though we don't actually get the words "joy" or "rejoice" in *these* verses, we can certainly sense Paul's joy and confidence in the background.

When you read through his letters, that confidence comes through often and with some volume; which, totally makes sense considering how talented he was.

Paul was someone who was equally comfortable in his own skin as he was at war with himself and within himself. He was proud of who he was; but his identity was more than a little complicated.

Not only was he proud of his Jewish lineage, but it brought him a ton of joy. That ancestry connected him to everyone he admired the most—to all those faithful prophets and heroes and leaders of Israel's past.

These are his words to the Philippians: *If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised 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;*

In fact, Paul's joy and confidence came together so well that he believed he was not only living a righteous life...he was living without mistakes! In other words, he believed he was perfect. At least, in terms of obeying God's commandments—in terms of following every Jewish law, he never stumbled—never faltered—never screwed up.

I'll give you his words again. This is Paul in his peak bragging era: *If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

...as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Spotless. Blemish-free. Untainted. In a word...perfect.

Okay...when you start talking perfection, you've moved way beyond proud—way past confident. I feel like, at that point, you've booked a hotel in "fantasy land" and it's time to check for delusions. At the very least, it's probably time to eat some humble pie. Don't you think?

Paul's Jewish pedigree, along with his skill as a Pharisee and talent for doing everything God requires—all this together made him pretty full of himself.

But that all changed one day when he met the risen Christ. Everything changed one day when Jesus literally knocked him off his high horse. And as we read here in one of his last letters, Paul's identity would be fundamentally reshaped—reframed with Christ's love at the center of how he understands all things.

Now, make no mistake about it. Long after his "conversion," to the end of his days, Paul is who he is. He continues to act boldly. He never loses that braggadocious swagger. Except, now the source of that confidence has changed. Now, the joy he expresses and lives with comes from serving the person he used to persecute.

Not even the bars of his prison cell can contain his trust in Christ—his trust that Christ is working in the world—that the gospel can never be muzzled—that Jesus is with him in that cell empowering him to move forward with hope.

Yes, it is Christ giving him the strength and the conviction to write with purpose—to face each day with the assurance that he isn't alone—never alone—that he's still being guided toward the goal—to the prize—to the finish line.

Though, perhaps what's most striking about Paul's new life in Christ is how everything he used to value the most now means practically nothing to him. He not only receives a new name and new mission, but a completely different value system.

Those markers of identity he'd always put so much stock in—that he'd taken so much pride in—they pale in comparison to the identity he's been given now. What used to be most important to him no longer means much at all.

I wonder what identity markers we tend to blow out of proportion? Which aspects of who we are (or think we are) do we allow to compete with our identity in Christ? What do we allow to separate us from our siblings in faith, forgetting the unity we share in Christ?

I can think of a few...I'm sure you can too...

Here's how Paul puts it: *Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.* (Repeat). Whatever advantages or privileges these used to give me, Paul says, they aren't worth the breath it takes to say them compared to the grace received through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Not even close.

Paul goes on—takes it a step further: *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, & I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.*

There's that boldness again. Now he's expanded his vision. Now, it's not just his lineage and accomplishments and job titles. Now, it's everything—everything he knew and understood about God and the world—including his own weaknesses and prejudices—knowing Christ puts his entire past life into the proper perspective because he sees it all with new eyes.

In fact, those things he valued the most—things like powerful connections, status, perfectly following God's Law—all of it is dwarfed into obscurity with Christ in his life. Those things aren't even worth keeping around anymore. Paul says they're "rubbish," trash, refuse.

Everything that separates us from our neighbors—everything that threatens our unity in Christ—time to throw it away. Let it rot.

Even Paul's coveted Roman citizenship isn't worth a dead fig tree in the Kingdom of God. Some of you, know if we kept reading, Paul goes on to remind the Philippians of where their true citizenship is: heaven. So it is with us, too, my friends. So it is with us.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Today, our oneness in the Lord is our most valuable asset and greatest treasure—one bread, one body, one Lord of all. Is there any greater joy than meeting our siblings in faith at the table of grace, confident that all of us belong to God and to each other?

Here, at this table, Christ meets us in our diversity, in our individuality, in our uniqueness and proclaims, "We are each other's keeper." We belong together. We are more alike than we are different. Christ's presence at the table demolishes every wall that divides us.

Teri Ott of *The Presbyterian Outlook* writes that, on World Communion Sunday, we're "invited to loosen our grip on what's "ours" and embrace God's abundance as a gift meant to be shared." For everyone born, there's a place at the table.

What things from the past won't you let go? What burdens are you carrying? What won't you give up? What's holding you back from the goal—from the prize set before you?

For there will be joy in the letting go.

And remember... We don't have to make it on our own. Look at the communion of saints that surround you. We don't have to make it on our own. But we press on, we do our best, we come together, we give as much grace as we receive. We don't have to make it on our own because Christ has made us his own.

Let us rejoice in the good news.

Amen.