

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15;
Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Don't you hate it when you come in like ten minutes before your favorite television show was started. You never really catch up. You never know who the bad guys are! I love CSI. It is all about science and crime scenes. But if you miss the very beginning of the show, you miss what happened right before the crime was committed, so you spend the rest of the hour trying to catch up and figure out what the heck is going on.

The reason I bring that up is that I feel that way about the reading today from Philippians. Philippians today begins after the beginning of the chapter. It begins in the middle of a sentence. Now I know that the chapters and the verses were all decided on hundreds of years after the letters were written. But still in the middle of a sentence! It didn't make any sense to me. I figured that maybe I should read to you from the beginning of the chapter. It is only a few lines so maybe we will have a better idea of what Paul is talking about.

Here is how it starts: "Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. Beware of the dog. Beware of the evil doers. Beware of those who mutilate the flesh for it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh even though I to have reason for confidence in the flesh." That is the part we got to hear.

So now that you know the beginning of the chapter, we all know what Paul is talking about, right? He is talking about dogs, evil doers, mutilators of the flesh. Now doesn't that clear everything up? No! Well, maybe it is not as clear as I thought it was. But Paul is warning them again. The people that he is calling dogs and evil workers and mutilators, are some Christian leaders who have been telling new Christians, who didn't start out in the Jewish faith, that in order to follow Jesus they must follow those laws. They are telling them you can't be saved unless you are circumcised. But isn't that putting conditions on God's love? That is why Paul says, we are the circumcision who worship in the spirit and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.

Just in case anybody wonders, Paul should know about the law. He was an expert. He lists all of his credentials right in the letter: circumcised on the 8th 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. That is a pretty solid resume! But then in the very next line of the letter, he says, that all of this he counts as law, in comparison to knowing Jesus Christ. Now how can that be?

Well, what Paul writes is, I regard everything as laws because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For this 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 from faith in Christ. The righteousness from God based on faith. So there it is. Did you hear it? All the things that Paul used to think important such as his heritage, his education in the law, even the circumcision. All human righteousness is all worthless because the righteousness that brings salvation comes from God through faith.

But wait a minute. Does this mean that God was saying that being part of a faith community is worthless? Is he saying that education is unnecessary? Daniel, don't listen to them! My son is in the back hiding! Is he denying his heritage? Not at all! After all, Jesus came to Paul on the road to Damascus and called him to ministry as he was—an educated member of the Jewish faith, circumcised, and a Pharisee. It is not the facts of his life that Paul is denying. It is his former attitude toward them. Paul is going to use his education and his ability to speak Hebrew to gain followers for Christ, so we can't say he wanted to deny them. But these things are not the way to salvation. As tools to bring others to Christ, Paul uses his assets with great effectiveness and he certainly never loses his zeal. His ability as a preacher and a teacher brought the message of Christ to people far and wide. His ability to share the good news about Jesus Christ is still effective today as we read his letters.

But, he has redirected his focus from himself to God in Christ. This righteousness of Christ is both priceless and free. There is no amount of payment for our own action that can purchase the righteousness that brings eternal life. It is truly priceless. Christ, the faithful servant of God, offers us this priceless gift, freely and without condition through his selfless death on the cross. That is why Paul wants to be found in Christ, not in the law.

It is in being bound to the law that we get caught up in trying to find our way to God. We think if we can just obey the commandments, if I can just find that perfect prayer, if I can just go to the right church, I'll be saved. But the problem is that we can't do those things, even Martin Luther tried, he built up a resume almost as good as Paul's. Baptized, raised in a Christian household and well educated, he entered a monastery and became a monk, a teacher, a priest, and he prayed. He confessed even his teeniest, tiniest little sin. All of this led him to what? Well, he is quoted as saying, "If ever a monk got to heaven by his 'monkery,' it would be me." He also said, "If I had gone on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils and prayers and reading and other work." Just like Martin Luther, we can get caught up in trying to find our own righteousness. Our own way to God.

Now I don't know if you have read this book, I know it was part of one of the adult studies. It is called "Reclaiming the L word." The L word is Lutheran by the way. It is written by a Lutheran pastor and is about being a Christian in the modern world who also happens to be a Lutheran. One of my professors once explained our relationship with God in this way. "God always comes down. God always comes down! There is never anything that we can do to make our way up to God. God came down in Jesus and God still comes down in the bread and the wine, in the water of our baptism, and in the fellowship of believers." Martin Luther, like Paul, didn't discard his assets and education and heritage. He simply changed his focus. From himself and what he could do to get up to God, to preaching and teaching that we have a God who always comes down to us with the free and priceless gift of eternal life.

So now maybe Paul's story makes a little bit more sense, and for me and you it means that God comes down to us where we are and who we are. God does not want us to discard our education or our work ethic or our faithfulness. What we are called to do and what Paul talks about striving to do, is to use our abilities to serve God and our neighbor in response to the free gift of salvation. We are not there yet, but we can return to the end of the reading from Paul and find guidance. "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Amen.