

The Worth of My Résumé

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 27
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

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

As the parents of a high school senior, Randy and I are just entering the throes of helping Sarah prepare college applications. Naturally, Sarah needs to provide teacher recommendations and transcripts to these college admissions offices. As well, she has had to list any awards, extra-curricular activities, and leadership roles. You learn to list everything—and I mean **everything**—from band and chorus to yearbook to serving as an acolyte here at Trinity Lutheran Church.

Back in **my** high school days (whenever I say this, for some reason my kids groan and roll their eyes), I, too, filled out college applications or scholarship forms, listing all my achievements. Since it was the Dark Ages, I didn't fill these applications out on-line. I printed neatly on my forms, and it was laborious. But I made certain I noted each activity and achievement, however small, hoping it would make the difference between acceptance and rejection, between receiving scholarship monies or needing to take out a larger loan.

Three of Sarah's classmates achieved semi-finalist status in the National Merit Scholarship program. Three Camp Hill seniors had test scores on their PSAT's that were high enough to rank them as semi-finalists nationwide. Later this year, they may well be named finalists, and receive scholarships for their academic achievements on this standardized test. It would be a well-deserved honor for them.

Back in **my** high school days, I took the PSAT's, too. I was not a finalist. I was not a semi-finalist. My test scores, however, were high enough to propel me to what was known as "commended" status. For this status I did not receive a scholarship. No, instead I received a nice paper certificate to put in my scrapbook. Whoo-hoo!

But I used my "commended" status to my distinct advantage—scholarship or no scholarship. I took to listing that commended status whenever I needed to fill out forms regarding my activities and achievements. It looked impressive, especially when you didn't use the acronym, but spelled it out word-for-word. Yes, I was a Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test-National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test Commended Student. Print that out in big letters, and you can take up nearly three lines.

I'm sure I thought it made me look important. I'm sure I thought it improved my chances by enhancing my identity. It became part of my mantra about myself in the year prior to college; my glowing academic achievement.

Yes, we learn early in life to keep a running list of our achievements—not only for use on résumés and application forms, but in many areas—creating a personal mantra about ourselves, a glowing list that provides identity, security, confidence. We find ways, don't we, to toot our own horn? Subtly perhaps—but always in order to boost our standing within some group or situation, in our own eyes, or even in the eyes of God.

This reality of our humanness is precisely what Paul writes about in our second lesson. In his letter here to the Church at Philippi, he admits to the personal mantra that served as his identity, security, and confidence for years. Look at this list . . . some of his achievements were things that were happenstance, things he had absolutely no control over, but he lifted them up in order to lift himself up in others' eyes. For example, Paul was born into the Israelite tribe of Benjamin, making him a pureblood in the sense that he didn't merely convert to Judaism, but always was of Israelite line and lineage. Not to mention (though Paul certainly does) that he was circumcised as all good Jewish baby boys were—on the 8th day, which was what the Law of Moses required, and which we can read in Leviticus. Frankly, none of this, including the circumcision, was his doing, his achieving, his résumé to control. But Paul, for the many years prior to his conversion to Christianity, considered these very things achievements to be lauded. They made him feel important, believe he was important.

Then there were the pieces of his résumé that certainly **were** achievements on his part. Paul writes that he followed the Law of God to the letter. He obeyed the Ten Commandments to the fullest extent, obeying both the written Word of God in scripture, as well as the latest interpretations by the scribes, seeking above all to do exactly what the Lord God wanted him to do. For all the negative press that the Pharisees get in New Testament scripture, when Paul called himself a Pharisee, he considered himself part of a sect of Judaism that strove to be ultra-faithful to God's commands. That was an achievement.

Finally, there was a piece of his résumé which Paul thought was his crowning achievement, but with which we look back on in horror: His zeal in rounding up Christians for persecution. The new Christian religion, its followers a distinct minority in the region, was seen by the majority as not only ultimately contrary to Judaism, but also as an enemy of the Roman Empire. Most certainly, Paul considered his role in the arrest and persecution of Christians very important, and, best of all, that it elevated his status in the eyes of God.

Like Paul, you and I learned early in life to keep that running list of our achievements. And, just like Paul, some of them were pretty much happenstance and not by our doing—we were born into the right family or situation, our reputation garnered from bloodline, our opportunities gained from wealth. Like Paul, some of our achievements we actually can claim to have attained all on our own: By the sweat of our brow and the work of our hand, by our ingenuity and intelligence. We are self-made with a can-do attitude, and proud of it. Then again, like Paul, some things on our personal résumés we might **consider** achievements, but in truth they are wrongful words and deeds which have elevated our status at the expense of others—the honest recognition of which rightly ought to bring repentance.

And all too often these so-called achievements did indeed become our personal mantra about ourselves. We believed they made us important. We believed they provided identity, security, and confidence.

But if we are honest, we discover our résumés cannot really provide any of that. For our humanly-constructed achievements can fail, or if they do happen to remain standing, they can become barriers to our relationship with God. Like this achievement . . . “I've been a member of Trinity for years, I've chaired umpteen committees, and this is the way we've always done things so I say there's no reason to change now.” (Ahh, but new folks are coming in the doors all the time with new ideas, and there are others out there we have not yet reached with the love of God, and maybe that means changing the way we do some things!)

Or this achievement . . . “I’ve met my goals. I’ve got money in the bank, a job with a solid company, a 401k plan, and a house in the ‘burbs.” (As if that provides security for us these days!)

Or this achievement . . . “Sure, I’ve had to step on a few people along the way, but that’s how you get ahead in this world. Besides, God helps those who help themselves.” (Only our Lord Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself and became obedient, even to giving his life! Words from Paul to the Philippians one chapter earlier than today’s.)

See, all the training we’ve received in life has been about how to be “Number One.” But today Paul tells us that’s nothing compared to being **one** with Christ, who gave himself to the world. Paul tells us our achievements achieve nothing. Paul, in this letter to the Philippian Church, having outlined his many achievements, then states emphatically that those things are nothing compared to knowing Jesus Christ as his Lord. In fact, they are less than nothing. Paul declares those achievements that have given him such identity, security, and confidence over the years, are no longer assets, but liabilities. If anything, these achievements which he held so dear are actually rubbish. Let’s be clear about the forcefulness of Paul’s language here. His word which we translate as “rubbish” is more vulgar a term than we realize. He says all these so-called achievements are dung. Refuse. Sewage. Nothing in his previous life compares in any way to knowing God in Christ. Now, Paul writes this while imprisoned and under threat of losing his own life. I realize it seems hard to believe that Paul could know Christ to be his identity, security, and confidence, but that is exactly what Paul was experiencing. Paul knows that, with Christ on his side, with Christ as his foundation, his life is richer and fuller now than ever before, even during those heady days where Paul experienced high status and accolades from all corners.

And then Paul is quick to add that his present knowing Jesus Christ is not something that should make Paul look and feel important, as if it is another of his personal achievements. He simply wants to know the Risen Christ more and more, day by day, in order to experience the power and new life that comes with such faith in him. He wants Christ’s Spirit to infuse his life with courage and direct his words and deeds that he might live in ways pleasing to God, and hang the résumé! That’s why Paul writes about straining forward, pushing himself further, reaching for the goal, striving—not to “achieve” in the sense of the word as we always seem to use it, but to grow ever more in faith, knowledge, and love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

That is a striving worthy for us all to undertake. May God strengthen you and me to reach that goal. **AMEN.**