

## ***Having All the Right Stuff***

Fifth Sunday in Lent  
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Sunday, March 21, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

A month ago, concerned that a rapid thaw of the snow piled around our house might cause flooding in the basement, my husband and I moved things around. We put bookshelves on wooden blocks, rolled up rugs, and moved boxes on the floor to higher ground. Of course, with every box, we asked each other things like, "Why are you saving this?" Now, Randy and I are not true packrats. However, we do have a few things saved in boxes that never see the light of day, but only find themselves shifted around at times like this. Two boxes contained things from my years at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg: Class notes and exams.....evaluations from Field Education, Clinical Pastoral Education, and my Internship year .....transcripts and diploma. **We're talking stuff from roughly 25 years ago.** Had I even once in those 25 years cracked open the notebook I kept from Dr. Nieting's class on the Letters of St. Paul? (Which might have proved insightful for today's sermon based on Philippians.) No, I did not. Did I even once in those 25 years refresh my memory of Dr. Gobbel's class on teaching confirmation in order to prepare for a confirmation class I was to teach? No, I did not. None of the stuff was ever touched again, just moved around various basements. So, in mid-February, it seemed as good a time as any to wade into those two boxes and figure out what was worth saving.

I whittled it down to one box, and the rest I threw away in the garbage. I was tempted to save my exams: The blue books in which I furiously wrote lengthy essays on Systematic Theology and Old Testament Prophets and Reformation History. I spent time that evening looking at those blue books to read any possible glowing comments from professors. But I eventually threw away the exams, too. My one remaining box contains formal evaluations, transcripts, and diploma. And those I probably won't view for another 25 years or when there's a big pile of snow in our yard—whichever comes first. My hope, after this winter, is that it's another 25 years.

But I admit it felt strange throwing those things out. In a sense, they were my credentials. If need be, I could have hiked those boxes up the steps, and shown any bishop or senior pastor or congregation just what kind of theological student I'd been. Prove worthiness for my call. Let people know that, like the astronauts, I have all "the right stuff." After all, it's comforting to have a "pedigree" to lean upon. Something—anything—that shows my accomplishments and grants me status.

It's like that in the world, isn't it? There is security in knowing you can shore up your present identity with your vita of the past—your resume, education, prior work experience, family background. We use our status all the time to get what we want. We use our status to acquire more status. Good grief, that's how you land a job! That's how you get elected! That's how you win awards!

There can be problems with this, however. Some people throw out their credentials with a dangerous sense of entitlement. Recall last month when a biology professor was accused of shooting six of her fellow faculty members at the University of Alabama at Huntsville, killing three of them. Investigations revealed that back in 2002, that same professor was charged with assaulting another woman at an International House of Pancakes restaurant because the woman had taken the last available booster seat. In a rage, the professor punched her while screaming, "I am Dr. Amy Bishop!" Of course, discussing your pedigree doesn't necessarily have to be dangerous, but it can be tedious—some of us throw out our status so much in casual conversation that it leads to glazed eyes and boredom.

Paul "throws out" his pedigree and status, too...**in the garbage**. In today's second lesson, part of his letter to the Church at Philippi, Paul uses a word we translate as "rubbish." It's actually stronger than that—it's a Greek word meaning "dung." Paul writes to the Philippians that everything he ever achieved in his past, any status he could once claim, he now views as dung, as worthless refuse. These words knock your feet out from under you, especially when you read Paul's lead-in here. You see, Paul offers his autobiography to the Philippians, and his vita was unquestionably strong. He tells them he had every right to be confident in his relationship with God. Circumcised, as a good Jewish boy would be, on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. Member of the chosen people of God who could trace his lineage back through the tribe of Benjamin, one of Jacob's sons. Educated as a Pharisee who knew Jewish Law in all its intricate detail. And not only knowing the Law, but fulfilling it. With enough religious zeal to be willing to strike out against those who would go astray—like those renegade Christians following someone named Jesus. Yes, Paul had all "the right stuff."

But now he tells the Philippians all that "right stuff" means nothing. In fact, he equates it with a financial loss on an accounting ledger. All his achievements are loss in comparison with his knowing and belonging to Jesus Christ. It's his relationship with Jesus that has value surpassing all else—a relationship that began on the road to Damascus in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Acts, when the Risen Jesus appeared to Paul and gave him real life in God.

Listen to what Paul says in verses 8-9: *For (Christ's) 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..*

Now, it may sound at first as if Paul was willing to stop bragging about his own excellent background as long as he could lift up a new vita that says his personal faith in Jesus is off the charts! Most faithful Christian this side of the Nile! Except

that's not what Paul's saying here. Paul admits in verse 9 he **doesn't** have the righteousness, the goodness, the perfection in his own self to be declared right before God. Instead, he is in Christ only "through faith in Christ," and we ought to translate that a little more clearly, too. Don't read it this way: "righteousness that comes *through Paul's faith in Christ*" but rather, read it this way: "righteousness that comes *through the faithfulness of Christ.*" That's Paul's new resume—**Jesus Christ is faithful** for Paul's sake.

It helps to know Paul's writing this letter from prison. Clearly, his past achievements are of little use behind bars. Instead, what sustains Paul, what fills him with joy in the midst of trial, and what empowers him to encourage others in the faith is that Paul believes Christ Jesus has made Paul his own.

Nothing on our own resume can put to death our sinfulness, effect new life in us or build our relationship with God. Our vita, while perhaps impressive, will not provide us lasting joy or strength in adversity, nor can it possibly bring hope and encouragement to someone around us in need. Only the faithfulness of Jesus Christ at work **for** us on the cross, at work **in** us through his Spirit can do those things. And Jesus' faithfulness is the **kind** of faithfulness that is even willing to shed his own status, become servant for you and me, die for you and me. Which is exactly what Paul writes about in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of his letter to the Philippians and will be next Sunday's 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson.

Jesus threw out his status willingly. You and I may find, however, we're **forced** by circumstance to throw out **our** status. James Howell, a pastor writer, wrote about a time in his life when he very nearly left the ministry because his pedigree no longer had meaning. Receiving a call about an emergency, he hurried to a local hospital. He found a young couple from his congregation, and their infant daughter, whom Howell had only recently baptized, in an examining room with doctors telling them little Caroline had a tumor at the base of her brain. She was transferred to Duke Medical Center, and Pastor Howell and the parents followed the ambulance there. All the while, Howell desperately wanted to say something, anything that would be the right thing to say—a meaningful Bible verse or an articulate and powerful prayer. Surely something from all those seminary years would come to mind. He'd used such words before when pacemakers were being installed and gall bladders were being removed. But he couldn't say a thing, except sob with the parents. The pediatric oncologist came in, calmly discussing the medical strategy designed for Caroline. Surgery was set for the next day. Howell was impressed, wishing he could say helpful things like that doctor. Feeling useless, Howell figured it was time to hang it up, resign from his ministry, do something else. Being totally impotent in the face of real pain was more than he could bear.

In the midst of his daydreaming about a career switch, Caroline's parents asked him a favor. They were exhausted, and Caroline, having been poked and prodded so much that day, was crying endlessly. They asked, "Could you hold her awhile so we can step out and take a little break?" So Pastor Howell took Caroline in his arms

and rocked and rocked her until in her own exhaustion she fell asleep. When her parents returned, they found Caroline sleeping peacefully.

As Howell left the hospital that evening, he knew he would not quit the ministry. In a sense, while none of the things he learned in seminary and none of his “credentials” could be used this dark evening, he realized that, in fact, God **had** been preparing him his whole life for this. Here’s how James Howell expressed it: *Why did I go into the ministry? To do something grand and impressive? Or because I thought I might love somebody, some family, some child, in God’s name? Holding Caroline, I wondered: isn’t this what Mary did with Jesus when he was sick during the night? ... Isn’t this what God Almighty had been doing with me all these years?*

And what has God Almighty, through the faithfulness of his Son Jesus, been doing with you and me all these years? Think about that. And then you and I can throw out those resumes we so hoped would impress God and others. We can toss them because they really mean nothing compared to the fact that Jesus Christ has made us his own. Ordained or lay, college degree or GED, lifelong Lutheran or new to the Christian faith, man or woman or child—you and I have been given all “the right stuff” to be people of God in this broken world of ours. It is our Lord’s faithful giving that makes it possible for us to forget what lies behind, and press on, ready to take up the great work of the kingdom he places before us every day. **AMEN.**