

Loss is Gain

Lent 5; Series C

Philippians 3:8-14

Can you recall a conversation you have had with a new convert to something? Whether the person has recently converted to Christianity or to watching a new television show or drinking a different kind of coffee or eating a different kind of food, from my experience, new converts typically have at least one thing in common. They are enthusiastic. They speak positively and with great enthusiasm about the recent change. Their enthusiasm can be very appealing and they can be very persuasive, sincerely trying to get you to do the same thing and so have the same experience. My youngest brother calls me at least once a month with excitement to tell me about a new food recipe. He tries with great persuasiveness to get me to try these recipes.

The Apostle Paul writes a letter of joy to the Philippians. The portion of the letter that we heard this morning in our Epistle lesson was occasioned by an interaction that the Philippian Christians had with some new converts to Christianity. Like many of the very first Christians, they had recently converted to Christianity from Judaism. They heard of the identity, life and work of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins and reconciliation with God, and they began worshipping Jesus as Lord, God himself, as the Bible testifies. God created a bold faith in them through the power of his Holy Spirit. This faith created excitement and enthusiasm. In their excitement and enthusiasm, these newly converted Jewish Christians went about proclaiming Christ.

These new converts proclaimed Christ with enthusiasm, but there was a problem. Some of them were preaching and teaching something about Jesus and salvation that was not consistent with the biblical teaching of Jesus and salvation. They were Jewish Christians that were trying to “have their cake and eat it too.” They were teaching falsely that in order to be a true Christian you had to bear the marks of a Jew as well. In other words, you had to obey all of the Jewish ceremonies and customs like circumcision, food laws, and certain Sabbath Day regulations. This false teaching earned this minority group the nickname, “Judaizers.” They were attempting to Judaize Christianity and they were binding the consciences of Christians with this sort of teaching. In short, they were teaching the Philippian Christians a “Jesus-plus” kind of Christianity. This is how you can be confident of your salvation, they claimed. You need to work out your salvation with human effort, works of the flesh—particularly, the fleshly or human works of circumcision and obedience to Jewish ceremonial laws. And so Paul writes to remind the Philippian Christians of a truth that applies to us even today. This truth is that before God, confidence in the flesh must be counted as loss.

We can use a biblical example from the Old Testament to illustrate the same point. God told the prophet Samuel to anoint the next king of Israel from the sons of Jesse (1 Samuel 16:1) since the current King, Saul, had continually disobeyed and dishonored the Lord. The sons of Jesse parade in front of Samuel. He sees the first son, Eliab, and thinks, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him” (1 Samuel 16:6). Yet, the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Many of Jesse’s strong, handsome sons marched in front of Samuel that day. Yet, David received the reward. He was the youngest. He was the smallest. Even though he didn’t appear to be throne-sitting material, this one was crowned king. The outward appearances did not matter. The

mighty works of the other sons of Jesse were of no benefit. Before God, confidence cannot be placed in these things. These are the things of man (Mark 8:33). God's ways are higher (Isaiah 55:9). Before God, confidence in the flesh must be counted as loss.

Humanly speaking, we may place our confidence in all kinds of things. We may excel at a game or in a sport partially because of self-confidence. We may place full trust and confidence in a friend when we tell them something personal. This is where we get our words "confide" and "confidant." We start our cars and drive them onto the road each day in full confidence that others on the road will obey the traffic laws and operate their motor vehicles safely and responsibly. You and I are consumers who place our confidence daily in the products that we buy from manufacturers and businesses. Confidence is a part of life in this world.

The Apostle Paul agrees that confidence is a part of life. He agrees that it is deeply human to place your confidence or trust in something or someone. He also knows and teaches the theological, biblical truth that confidence in human works and deeds of the flesh have no merit for salvation before God. Before God, the individual is in the arena of grace, not works. In order to make this theological point to the Judaizers who were boasting in their human works, Paul plays a hypothetical game.

He says, "Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more" (Philippians 3:4). He takes the Philippians through his former life as a devout Pharisee and says, "I was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless" (Ephesians 3:5-6). Paul had great gain, humanly speaking. Before men and in the eyes of the world he had great reason to be confident if his salvation depended upon him and his own merit. But in the very next verse Paul says, "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Ephesians 3:7). Before God, confidence in the flesh must be counted as loss.

As Christians, it is not as though we do not place confidence in someone else's flesh and someone else's work—we certainly do! In the flesh of Christ and the work of his sacrifice and resurrection from the dead we place great confidence for the forgiveness of sins and a right relationship with the one true God, our creator. As the Gospel reading reminds us, Jesus was the stone, the cornerstone, that the builders rejected (Luke 9:17). As we read from the Old Testament reading, through Christ God makes the way of grace through the wilderness of human works and effort in this world. Soldiers spit on him, beat him, and scourged his flesh. On Good Friday the religious leaders of Jerusalem and the Roman government counted the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth as loss. They deemed it worthless, worthy of nothing but suffering the most excruciating form of punishment and death available at the time. Yet, God had a different plan.

Our Heavenly Father counted the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ on Calvary as gain. He used the perfect sacrifice of his sinless, spotless Son for great gain. Through Christ God purchased forgiveness of your sins and mine. The world sees Christ as a loss. They see foolishness and worthlessness. God, the Father sees Christ as the way to gain you. You are of great worth to God. He is willing to pay a high price and suffer a great loss, even the loss of his firstborn Son.

Our Heavenly Father offers the sacrifice of his Son so that you might have the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as your Lord. Now we have the way back to our God that far surpasses the way of confidence in human works or deeds of the flesh. Now we have “Christ confidence.”

Now that we are built on the cornerstone of Christ and are following the way of Christ through the wilderness of this world, we can be free to give our works to those who need them. God does not need our good works of love and service, but our neighbors, families, and friends do. They need our good works that are forgiven in Christ—works that flow from a life that is daily lived in Christ and his forgiveness. When we return daily to the promise of life and forgiveness in Christ that God made to us in our baptisms, then we live empowered, forgiven lives. You may even find yourself being a little excited and enthusiastic about it! Amen.