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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 22, Series A (Pentecost 18)
Saturday, October 3rd, 2020
Sunday, October 4th, 2020

Sermon: Rubbish

Text: Philippians 3:4b-14

Focus: Knowing Christ is worth more than anything else in life.

Function: That they would put their hope and confidence in Christ, not themselves.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Listen again to the words of the apostle Paul:

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I account everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:7-8, ESV).¹

When I was growing up, my stepdad had extremely high standards for academic performance. He expected me and my sisters to excel in school and would accept nothing less than perfection. I was already taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes during my sophomore year. One day after a calculus exam, Jim asked me how I did.

“An ‘A,’” I said, “98 percent.”

“Only 98?” he asked. “What was the two percent you got wrong?”

Nothing I did was ever quite good enough for him. He hardly ever gave you an “attaboy.” He frequently told me that I wouldn’t amount to much in life and that my dreams for my future were foolish. Regarding my desire to be a writer, he said, “Why don’t you do something *useful* with your life instead?” (Jim didn’t read much poetry or fiction.) The only

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

time when I really heard him say anything good about me was when he used me as an object of boasting to his friends, as though I were a trophy and not a child. “Look at how smart my kid is. I really did right raising him, didn’t I?”

Despite my stepdad’s impossible standards, I always yearned for his love and approval (don’t ask me why). So I got on that hamster wheel and ran as fast as I could to complete assignments, ace my tests, and outdo my peers. My entire self-esteem and self-worth were performance based. I performed well, then I was a good person and worthy of love. If I made any mistakes, then I was a loser unworthy of love. (Thank goodness that physical education classes were graded on effort, not ability, or I would never have gotten that perfect 4.0 GPA.)

When I finished high school, I graduated first in my class. My diploma was embossed with gold foil declaring me to be the valedictorian of the class of 1999. But later that day, at my graduation party, my stepfather refused to allow my achievement to be my own and continued to make it all about him and his supposedly wonderful parenting.

Why do I tell you this? Well, let me assure you: it’s not for the sake of group therapy. I’ve already had plenty of that for my “daddy issues.” No, I tell you this because of the spiritual impact that my emotional relationship with my stepfather had upon my relationship with God.

My understanding of God the Father went right along with my view of Jim. Throughout most of my teen years, I viewed God as a distant, disapproving, disappointed old man who sat in watchful judgment of my every thought and action. In fact, until I heard the Gospel for the first time at a Lutheran church during my senior year of high school, I had pretty much assumed that I would be damned for failing to live up to God’s impossibly high standards of moral perfection. God doesn’t grade on a curve. Like Jim, he wanted 100% or nothing at all.

In our epistle lesson today, St. Paul trots out his credentials and achievements in order to convince the Philippian Christians to steer clear of the Judaizers and so-called “super-apostles,” who boasted of their circumcision and insisted that the Philippians must undergo the same in order to be saved. In other words, before you can become a Christian, they maintained, one must first become a Jew through circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses.

This distortion of the Gospel came into direct conflict with the message Paul preached—that we are justified before God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from any works of the law (cf. Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 3:24; Gal. 2:16). We are justified neither by sacred surgery nor by good works. Nothing *we* do can save us. God does all the saving. God must do it all. God is the one who justifies us—or makes us right with him—through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross.

So to emphasize this point, Paul highlights his pedigree and achievements. If the super-apostles thought they had reason to boast about their circumcision, Paul had more (Phil. 3:4). Unlike them, he was not a Gentile convert to Judaism. He was born and bred in the Jewish way of life—“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5; cf. Rom. 11:1). Not only was Paul born into the Jewish nation, but he was also raised in the Jewish faith. He grew up in the synagogue, familiar with all the Hebrew Scriptures. He studied at the feet of Gamaliel, the famous Jewish rabbi and member of the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:3; 5:34). With every breath Paul did his best to keep not only the Ten Commandments, but the entire Torah and the traditions of the Jewish elders. “As to the law,” he was “a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:5-6). From a human perspective, you couldn’t find a man more holy, more

obedient to God's commands, more zealous in his faith than Saul of Tarsus, the man who Paul was before he met Jesus on the Damascus road.

And yet, even with all his fine breeding and education, even with all his persnickety devotion to the law, Paul said that all of it was worthless compared to Christ. He writes, "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7). In verse 8 he calls it "rubbish," trash, garbage. The Greek word is not pleasant or polite. In fact, *skubalon* is a rather crude and dirty word. The King James Version translates it as "dung." That's getting closer. That definition will do. Or will it "doodoo"? *Skubalon* shows up only once in the Septuagint and never in the early Church Fathers' writings. You don't say *skubalon* in good company.

But compared to Christ, Paul counts everything else as *skubalon*—"rubbish," refuse, sewage, waste, *poop*. Because no matter how smart or well-bred or how holier-than-thou he may be, it will never be good enough for God. *Paul* will never be good enough for God without Jesus. And neither will you nor I.

The great mystery of the Gospel is that everything we treasure is worthless compared to the blood of Jesus. Even our supposed "righteousness" is nothing but filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). Better for the trash heap than for heaven. Our own righteousness will not do. We need a righteousness that comes from outside of us (*extra nos*)—an *alien* righteousness. We need the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the perfect, sinless, blameless Son of God who died to forgive our sins and rose again to win for us eternal life. We must know Christ and "be found *in him*, not having a righteousness of [our] own that comes from [obedience to] the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil. 3:9).

As fallen sinners born into rebellion against God, we're not much to look at. We are "poor, miserable sinners" (*TLH*). There's nothing particularly lovely or attractive about us. All

our trophies are garbage in God's sight—dung, *skubalon*. That is why Luther writes in his Heidelberg Theses of 1518 that “the love of God does not find its object in man, but must create it.” In other words, God doesn't love us because we are lovely. Rather, it is *his* love which makes us to *become* lovely.

So we seek not to make ourselves more impressive, but to be more impressed by the divine mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. Rather than boasting of our achievements, we boast in the cross. Rather than trying to impress our boss or spouse or parents, we marvel at the holy, precious blood of Jesus. We want to know him—and be known *by* him; we want to share in his suffering and resurrection (Phil. 3:10). We want to belong to Jesus (v. 12). *He* wants us to belong to *him*.

What are you most proud of in life? Your athletic prowess? Your intelligence? Your street smarts? Your wealth? Your good looks? Your long list of good deeds done today? The school you went to or the company you work for? The impressive achievements of your parents or children? None of that matters anymore. Not really, not for eternity. All of that will be over when you die—if it isn't taken away before then. Compared to knowing Christ, all of it is rubbish, garbage, sewage, waste—*skubalon*. Jesus is the real treasure.

The world doesn't need more self-esteem. It needs Christ esteem. We don't need any more participation trophies. We need participation in the death and life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of believing in ourselves, we need to believe in Jesus. Jesus is everything. Jesus does it all. Anything else is rubbish. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.