

## Lent 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday “Made God’s Own People by Faith” Phil 3

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Paul speaks of himself as a changed man. He was headed one way but now is going the other. It reminds me of the “Chosen” T-shirt that I sometimes wear. It has the words:

“I was one way,  
and now I am completely different.  
And the thing that happened in between  
was Him.”

What does this say about Paul to us? We tend to read Paul’s words through an extremely charitable or favorable lens. How do you think Paul’s change of course was received in the first century? Surely his fellow Pharisees were not terribly happy about it. It appears that some Christians were suspicious and others may have thought he went too far.

As Paul strains ahead (vs 13), he is forgetting what lies behind. The rubbish that Paul has rejected in vs 8 is not only the score keeping which noticed the good he has done, but also the negative checks on his record. There are two kinds of score keeping we like to do. One kind says that we have earned something from God, as if he reacts to my goodness. The other sort of score keeping is that I am so bad that God cannot love me, as if he reacts to my badness. Paul is saying that all this is rubbish, he has left it behind. God has given him a new start every day. He can strain instead for the goal that God has laid out for him. The past is past and it is in Christ’s capable hands. What matters is that he knows Christ.

Paul’s desire here would be considered crazy by many. He wants to be like Jesus in his death, in other words, that is the perfection he strives for. He wanted to know Jesus, but not just the Jesus of glory, but also the Jesus suffering, dying, rising from the grave. He wants to be like him in his death. Are we ready to say that? I know that I am not.

Paul of course writes this from prison, but he counter-intuitively writes about joy and exhorts the Philippians and us to a joy which is modeled on his joy which is modeled on Jesus whose story is summed up in the hymns founded upon Phil. 2:6-8:

Jesus Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

In the LSB alone there are 19 hymns based upon just these 3 verses, including 373 See Amid the Winter's Snow, 430 My Song is Love Unknown, and 544 O Love How Deep.

In describing and proclaiming this joy, Paul is advocating a radical displacement of the self from the center of my world, and a re-orientation of self into an orbit around Christ.

What is equally important is that Paul does not think that **he** has done this. **Jesus** has displaced Paul from that first place in his life. Of course, it helps to have an encounter with Jesus that literally knocks you off your horse and leaves you blind. But Paul is asserting that in the incarnation and the obedient self-sacrifice of Christ on that cross, Jesus has displaced us from that position of “most important.”

For the Romans of the first century this was a frontal assault on their culture which enshrined boasting or self-promotion as a virtue. Boasting was a little like having a resume.

In today's reading, Paul is getting testy. He starts by suggesting that those who think otherwise than he does about this humility are “dogs” (verse 2). Considering the OT lesson with its emphasis on jackals praising God, I wish that the pericope had included that verse.

Paul used to be one of those guys who was the self-promoting type. He had a claim on no less than God himself. He had kept the rules, and God, at least in his old way of thinking, should have noticed that.

Now, of course, he thinks such things are rubbish, worthy only to be left in the big can which we leave by the curb on Wednesday mornings on my street. Burly men in the large truck come by early in the morning, crush that stuff into a tidy little blob and dump it in a land fill somewhere. That is all such thinking is good for, the dump.

Paul's life has been totally restructured, completely reoriented, reborn and made new. Christ is his rising sun and North Star. He wants nothing else than to know Him.

It is for Jesus' sake that Paul has suffered and will eventually die. Here we get a troubling phrase, troubling because our English rather betrays us. The RSV used to say "so that I may somehow attain to the resurrection of the dead." This is even worse in some respects. It seems to suggest that Paul's resurrection is the result of him getting his suffering right. I think that, in an effort to remain faithful to the actual Greek words, both translations have actually done a disservice to understanding. It sounds, when you read this, like Paul is not sure that he will be raised, as if the resurrection were in some way less than a sure thing. Or one can read it as if he is responsible for whether it happens or not.

That is not really the way the Greek reads here. Paul is sure the resurrection will happen, but he is not entirely certain exactly how Jesus pulls that off. There is an indefinite word in there, and it is "somehow", but it doesn't really refer to the resurrection itself, but to the mode or manner of that resurrection. The "how it happens" he is leaving in Jesus hands, but the fact of the resurrection he has a promise from him. So, even though he is facing death, and he knows it, he is certain that somehow Jesus will raise him from the dead. That resurrection thing is a mystery and Paul is not about to explain it. Somehow, Christ will get that done.

We have to remember that Paul often speaks as though he thinks Jesus will come back any day. He seems to fully expect that he would live to see the last day.

In the next verses, Paul even admits that he has a long way to go. The good work which Christ began in him is not yet complete. Remember this is a work of God, not of Paul. But as far as God has taken him, he will strive to hang on to that which he has been given, and he exhorts the rest of us to think the same way.

But then, in the omitted verses, Paul speaks with a remarkable humility. The mature can think this way, but if you don't, that is not really a problem for Paul. God will show you the way. He is totally confident of this. Just hang onto what you have from God. It is a life raft, a life preserver in the storm of this life. Hang onto that promise of your baptism and Christ's gift to you. Don't slide back into that economy of buying and selling from which God had rescued Paul and has rescued us. Don't assert your ego-centric universe from which God rescued you.

For Paul, the good news of God's work in Christ involves not only His death but also His resurrection, His rule and return to restore all things. When Paul sees his life through the large lens of the gospel, he reconceives his past, present, and future. Because of Christ's death, Paul lives confidently in the righteousness of Christ; because of Christ's resurrection, Paul is empowered for service in difficult circumstances, and because of Christ's return, Paul lives in hope of the final resurrection and the restoration of all creation.

For us, the apostle Paul's self-revelation is a blessing. He takes us behind the scenes of celebrity status to see what a true Christian's life looks like. As Christians, our confidence lies not in our works but in the work of Christ for us. His death forgives us from sin and therefore we treasure and remember our baptism. His resurrection empowers our living, and therefore we press on in the present struggles. We live sacrificially in a world of consumption, we seek the interests of Christ in a world of self-interest, and we participate in the community of Christ in a world of individuals, freely receiving his saving Word and Sacraments. Finally, His promised return to restore all things gives us hope.

While we labor in his kingdom, we look not to the results of our work to justify our efforts, but rather turn we to his promise, trusting that in His time, He will return and restore all things. For He has already done everything necessary for our salvation. He is our Rock, our sure and certain hope.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!