

Lent 2010 – We Preach Christ Crucified

"More Precious Than Life"

Text: Philippians 3:7-11

*A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, the guilt of all men bearing;
And laden with the sins of earth, none else the burden sharing.
Goes patient on, grows weak and faint, to slaughter led without complaint,
That spotless life to offer;
Bears shame, and stripes, and wounds and death, anguish and mockery, and saith,
"Willing all this I suffer." (TLH 142)*

The theme for our meditations this Lenten season is "We Preach Christ Crucified." This evening we will be reminded of the starkly dramatic truth that "Christ crucified" is far more precious to us than even life itself. The text that will form the basis for our meditation is found in Paul's Inspired Letter to the Philippians, the Third Chapter:

Philippians 3:7-11 *But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

These are the verbally inspired words of our God. Trusting that our God will once again bless us through the study of these words, so we pray, ***"Sanctify us through your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."*** Amen.

Fellow Christians:

Life in our country has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. That's not all bad, of course, but it certainly isn't anything like all good either. One of the changes that's hard to miss is in the area of competition. Human beings have always been competitive by nature. The baser elements of competition are pride and greed, so it is unlikely in the extreme that society will ever rid itself of even the unseemly sort of competition that is so evident in so many facets of our lives.

The fascinating part of this is that our present society seems to be trying to do just that, but not at all for right reasons. In other words, parents today, as just one example, are trying to make as many elements of a child's life as non-competitive and gender neutral as possible – not so much because they want to teach their children about the dangers of pride and greed, but because they want to shield their children from the realities of failure. What they accomplish is actually just the opposite of humility, since the illusion of never failing actually *promotes* rampant pride in children.

The poster child example here is soccer. Nothing wrong with soccer, but parents and school systems (beginning on the left coast) began promoting that sport above all others as soon as they came to realize just what a safe-haven that sport could provide for those afraid to allow their children to fail. Obviously a great deal of skill is required to play soccer at a high level, but what many schools and parents love about the sport is that almost any child with little or no athletic ability can run around a soccer field with impunity – failure free. It isn't like basketball, for example, where it is immediately obvious to all that your child can't dribble or shoot; or baseball, where failure is again obvious when your child strikes out every time he bats or throws the ball into the left field bleachers pretty much every time he touches it. Parents today seem to be far more concerned about their child's self-esteem than with teaching that child the immutable (and healthy) lessons of failure – which is the reality of life in the real world.

It never used to be that way. Kids were allowed to fail, and that failure resulted in better adjusted, more realistic adults as they grew and matured. The inevitable result of our present system was laid out in an international math test that was given to high school students a couple of years ago. American students' math scores were among the lowest of any developed nation, and yet when the students were asked how good they were at math, those same American students universally believed that they were the very best in the world. This is the sort of delusional thinking that "no fail" systems foster. There will always be failure in life; the only variable is how human beings learn to deal with it.

This obvious detachment from reality would be mildly amusing if it was restricted to things like math and athletics. Life has a way of fixing that problem. A healthy dose of reality eventually will squash a kid's illusion of superiority. The real tragedy is that this sort of nonsense also spills over into religion. "No fail," when applied to religion, means that everyone gets to go to heaven – pretty much no matter what. It means that all religions are equal, and that no one is wrong – no matter what a human being believes about God and salvation. Multiple bridges across the chasm and all that.

If that were true, Jesus was the consummate fool and God the Father was a monster – Jesus for suffering needlessly and God the Father for sending his Son to be tortured and killed for that which could have been accomplished another way.

But that wasn't the case, was it? The very point of Lent and our Savior's unimaginable anguish and suffering was that there simply was no other way for human beings to be rescued. Our text leaves no doubt whatsoever. In fact Paul there surveyed the entire broad landscape of human existence and religiosity and came to this conclusion in our text: ***"Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ."***

It was as if Paul divided absolutely everything in his existence into two piles. In the one "pile" was the simple truth of Christ crucified. In the other pile was everything else. Obviously lots of stuff in that other pile, and yet Paul looked at it all and affixed one simple label to the whole heap: "Garbage." No, it's even worse than that: "Manure."

Understand something here. Paul did not here say that everything in that other huge pile *was* garbage. He said he *"counted all those things as garbage."* In other words, not everything in that pile is necessarily bad or sinful, in itself. Paul's point was that it all pales in comparison to Jesus Christ and salvation by grace through faith.

It is easy (and not very helpful) for us to sit back and agree with Paul wholeheartedly *in the abstract*, without really thinking about it too hard. It's easy to glance at the pile of other stuff *as a whole* and write it off as Paul does. The problem comes when we look at the pile more closely – when we start to sort through it a bit and actually examine what is all in there that this whole exercise starts to actually prove beneficial to us.

Remember, Paul isn't saying that everything in that other pile is worthless or bad; he says that he counts it as worthless in light of what is in the other pile – Christ crucified. So we sort through the big pile this evening and we begin to be mightily impressed at what we find there. Take a look. Look closely. There's your career, your house, your vehicles, your wardrobe, your furniture, your reputation or standing in the community – my goodness but there are some good and valuable things here! In fact if you rummage around a bit you'll find your very life – your human existence itself! Trash? Garbage? Look around some more. Every pile is different. Take it all in. Make a list.

Now look at the other "pile" and be reminded that it consists of just one thing: the knowledge of (faith in) Jesus Christ and him crucified. This is exactly the sort of thing that, in a religious sense, separates the men from the boys – true Christians from those who only dabble in religiosity. False

Christians – and to a certain extent our own sinful flesh – will never accept the loss of the big pile. Think of Jesus' enemies in the Passion History account that we are rereading again this year during our midweek services. This was *exactly* what was bothering them. They were in no way willing to give up anything in the big pile for something that they actually considered of little value – Jesus Christ.

Pontius Pilate, for example, looked in his big pile and found his career, his wealth, and his reputation with his superiors in Rome. His choice, his solution? First whip Jesus, and then crucify him. Keep the big pile.

Herod? Same mindset. Same outcome. Caiaphas the High Priest? The members of the Jewish Ruling Council (Sanhedrin)? Judas Iscariot? Same two piles, same choice, same outcome. In the hearts and minds of each one of them, Jesus was absolutely not worth giving up *anything at all* in this life. Nothing. In fact to each of them, Paul's words in our text would have to be reversed: everything in life had greater value than Jesus, which is exactly why they treated him like garbage.

Clearly we don't see it that way. The very notion that our Savior Jesus is "garbage" is sheer blasphemy to our ears. How horrible to have to stand one day before God the Father and answer for such sins, such blasphemous ideas concerning his dear Son.

And yet all of this still remains a bit artificial for us unless and until we return to this evening's theme: *Christ crucified is more precious than life itself*. Our very lives here on earth are in the big pile, aren't they – for every single one of us. They *have to* be in that pile, don't they? Jesus himself told us that they can't be in the little pile. He said in John 12:25: **"He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."** Again in Matthew 16:25-26 **"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"** This last represents the bottom line for all true Christians, doesn't it? This is the point, the nub, the crux: *Without saving faith in Jesus Christ, nothing else matters*. Nothing. Ever.

Obviously this sort of thinking, this Christian faith and hope, will be foolishness and a source for ridicule by the world around us. They find it absolutely incredible that anyone would ever give up the sorts of things that Christians routinely carry to the curb, all for the sake of what the world considers a silly, superstitious myth. That's why Christians can always look out their windows and see the world frantically digging through our big piles and carrying off absolutely everything that they can – including, at times, our very lives.

The worst, most disgusting and damaging bit of trash that they carry off? The idea that man can win God's approval by his actions or good works. That very thing had once been Paul's most prized possession, but when he came to know Christ, work-righteousness instantly became the most vile and loathsome of all of his trash. He put it this way in our text: **"...not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith."** This is the heart and soul of the Christian faith, the very gospel itself. When Paul was given this truth as his own personal possession, nothing else mattered.

Our simple prayer this evening is that you and I would always agree with Paul's accounting – wholeheartedly and without any reservation of any kind. God sees fit to bless us with so many things as we pass through this life, but they will always be highly expendable for God's children, those who are just passing through. Let this also be our view of earthly life itself, since we know it is only a temporary walk to a much better place – an eternal place that makes this present world profoundly insignificant. God keep us so focused this Lenten season and always. Amen.