

18 Pentecost, Proper 22

October 4, 2020

Philippians 3:4b-14

I would like to concentrate on the Philippians reading this morning and, even so, there is a lot to say and so you'll forgive me if I extend our time a little.

The first thing I'd like to point out is true both of this reading and of the Gospel which tells the story of the wicked tenants.

Unfortunately, both of these readings have sometimes been interpreted by Christians to mean that God no longer care for the Jews and that they have been replaced in their chosen status by the Christians. That attitude and interpretation was used to support persecution and worse. Thankfully, we've finally figured out that that is NOT what Jesus or Paul were talking about and that God has not displaced the Jews but is faithful to his covenant with them. There's room for everyone in God's heart.

Let's look more closely at the Philippians reading. A bit of context is helpful here. It's good to remember that Paul is writing this letter from prison and yet he tells his readers to rejoice. Those two things don't sit together easily for us but as Paul says in the part we heard this morning, he has come to the point where he finds joy in suffering as Christ did, knowing that he will also participate in Christ's resurrection.

A little more context: Paul is probably responding to other preachers who came to Philippi after he left, preaching a different gospel. Part of that was their teaching that you had to become a Jew before you could become a Christian – you'll remember the whole issue around circumcision. Part of it also must have been that they were holding up their credentials and saying they had more credibility than Paul. So he responds with this list of his own credentials: a Jew, circumcised early in life, a Pharisee, one who

kept the law, one who was righteous and blameless in the eyes of the law. OK, he's saying, if you want to boast, listen to this. And in an honor society where status counted for almost everything, he has a pretty impressive CV. But that's not where he's going with all that because he moves on to say that he has figured out that none of that matters – he counts it all as rubbish, he says. He used to find his core identity in those things, but now he finds it in Christ Jesus. He used to think he was a self-made man, that he could do it on his own, and his goal was to become that righteous, blameless man. But something happened.

And we remember that what happened was that he had that experience of the risen Christ when he was on his way to Damascus, when he was literally knocked off his horse and figuratively knocked into a new and much broader understanding. Now he understands his goal very differently. Now, he says, he wants nothing more than to KNOW Christ Jesus, his Lord. He wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. And, in light of that goal, all the other stuff no longer matters. He's ready to toss it all away.

Figuring out what matters and throwing everything else away. We know about that from everyday experience. My sister is trying to consolidate two households into one and, to manage that, has given a lot of stuff away. She still finds she has a lot left. Trying to help, I gave her a book by one of the downsizing gurus. The one piece of advice I remember from the book was that each person should have one towel. Now that's downsizing with a vengeance. In that same vein, it's said that when the early settlers trying to get to California and Oregon found that their loaded Conestoga wagons were too heavy to make it over the mountains, they threw out everything that wasn't essential to life itself. That's what Paul did. He was like the fellow in the parable

who found the treasure in the field and went and sold everything else in order to possess that. He found that he had had the wrong goal, that he had been running in the wrong direction. He discovered that it wasn't about fulfilling the minute details of the law. Rather it was about putting on the mind of Christ.

Just before this passage, you may remember what we read last week, that Christ, even though he was God, didn't exploit that ultimate status, but emptied himself. And we talked about that characteristic of God, self-emptying, letting-be – letting there be light, sun, moon, stars, humans and everything else besides. So, not about status and accumulation, but just the opposite, about self-emptying. Not about upward mobility, but about downward mobility.

To go back to the beginning idea of how this resonated with Judaism, Paul was a Jew and, like Jesus, he was trying, not to start a new religion, but to reform the one they had. Jesus was bringing a new and deeper understanding, essentially fulfilling the heart of the law. Recognizing that, Paul went from pride in what he saw as his own accomplishments to gratitude to God for every gift, especially the gift of the incarnate Jesus.

Paul says that his goal now is to know Christ Jesus. You may remember that "know" in this context means much more than intellectual knowledge. It means a kind of deep intimacy, a deep understanding. A union, if you will. Paul talks about this elsewhere when he says that in God we live and move and have our being. God in us and we in God.

There's another way to phrase this relationship. It's the call to be holy, or to be a saint. And that is what each of us is called to. So I think it makes sense to think for a minute about what we mean when we say that. I read one commentator who talked about being with a youth group in TN when they were approached by

some zealous Christians who were passing out pamphlets on how to be holy. It started with the need to join their church and then it laid out a kind of roadmap to holiness. The youth minister's face must have shown his disagreement because one of the kids asked him: OK, you disagree, but how do we get to be holy? It would be great, wouldn't it, to have an exact roadmap: say this prayer, this many times, get circumcised, don't murder anybody, give this amount of money to the church, whatever. What Paul is saying here is, "I TRIED THAT AND IT DIDN'T WORK." Instead, Jesus came to Paul and changed everything. God comes to us in one way or another. For a few people it's getting knocked off your horse; for most of us, it's a gradual deepening of insight and understanding until we, too, come to realize that our goal is holiness, until we too realize that nothing short of putting on the mind of Christ will satisfy us. Until we too realize that sanctity is about coming to dwell in the presence of God.

There's a lot pulling us in the opposite direction. And right now, I think what's doing that is a pervasive anxiety. So, in closing, I'd like to share with you something that Fr. Richard Rohr sent out with his daily meditations. He starts with the recognition that these are anxious times, but he offers three things, three sources, for our consideration:

Something from Etty Hillesum, the young Jewish woman who died in a concentration camp, Psalm 62 which probably was written at a time of oppression and Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" during WWI and the Spanish pandemic.

Here's Hillesum:

There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too...And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of you, God, in ourselves.

And the psalm:

In God alone is my soul at rest. God is the source of my hope. In God I find shelter, my rock and my safety. Men are but a puff of wind, Men who think themselves important are a delusion. Put them on a scale, they are gone in a puff of wind.

And Yeats:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

Rohr goes on to say that our vocation during this sad time must be to first restore the divine center by holding it and fully occupying it ourselves, by safeguarding that little piece of God within each of us. Everything else is tearing us apart. We cannot abide in that anxious place because:

God cannot abide with us in a place of fear, or a place of ill will or hatred. God can't speak inside of so much angry noise and conscious deceit. God cannot be found when we are far from "the Falconer." God can't be born except in a womb of Love, so offer God that womb. Stand as a sentry at the door of your senses for these coming months, so the "blood-dimmed tide" cannot make its way into your soul.

That's the path way to peace as well as to sanctity. We walk it together in these difficult times. Amen.