

April 03, 2022

Philippians 3:8-14

On the Way to Calvary ...

“So We Can Know”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A man once confessed to his pastor, “I don’t particularly like Lent, but I love Christmas and Easter.” After a brief pause, the pastor replied, “I don’t particularly enjoy Lent either, but I need it.”

The *LSB Altar Book* defines the forty days of Lent as “a holy season of prayerful and penitential reflection. Our attention is especially directed to the holy sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. From ancient times the season of Lent has been kept as a time of special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently on His Word and draws from it life and hope.”

On this *Fifth Sunday in Lent*, we are still *On The Way to Calvary*. Our Gospel lesson appropriately sets before us the *Parable of the Tenants*. The owner of the vineyard sends his Son to go to Jerusalem. The Gospel of Luke tells us:

But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “Surely not!” But he looked directly at them and said, “What then is this that is written: “‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

We continue to reflect on God’s Law and our failures, sins, and mortality. God has now given most of his vineyard to the Gentiles and what a blessing to be part of that great vineyard! We look back at how the religious leaders and the people of Israel treated Jesus and ask ourselves if we would do the same if he were here in our midst today. We pray that we may not fall on that stone or that it may not fall on us. We ask the Holy Spirit to fix our eyes on Jesus, the pure and holy Lamb of God, whose sufferings and sacrificial death saves us from the darkness of our unrighteousness.

Perhaps we do not particularly like Lent - perhaps we do not enjoy it at all - but we sure do need it. Lent and our lessons for this day are **So We Can Know** - so we can know Jesus, “... and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible we may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Powerful words from Paul! We have not already obtained the resurrection of the dead. We are not yet perfect. But we press on to make it our own. As Paul writes in our epistle lesson for this morning, “... one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

It’s time for us to learn to enjoy Lent because it really is the whole Christian life all the time - it is one of rejoicing in repentance. The word “enjoy” requires both an object and an objective. Jesus is that object - his sufferings, death, and resurrection applied to us in the means of grace. And the objective is to daily move forward - pressing on toward the goal - the prize that we may be with our Savior forever in eternal joy! All **So We Can Know** - so we can know Jesus and everything he gives forever!

The apostle Paul bids us to press on. This he does because there are so many things that are against us and trying to keep us from the goal for the prize. However in this section Paul is warning us in particular about ourselves. In the seven verses before our lesson for today, Paul outlines the problem. He writes in part: "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh [in good works], I have more: 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. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." Paul is warning us that the greatest danger to our reaching the goal for the prize is trusting in ourselves and in our good works to reach the goal for the prize.

At one time, the apostle Paul believed that the way to heaven depended on him to do everything right by being a good Jew - a good person. This insidious idea is always trying to worm it's way into our thinking. Paul believed that if he did what was commanded in the Law God would surely accept him. Luther believed that by being a good Christian monk, he would no doubt be welcomed into heaven when he died or in the event of judgment day. There is within our core the idea that if we do what is right we can offset the bad that we have done and please God. We are often like the rich man who asked Jesus, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" The problem for the rich man is the same for us all who think that heaven is bought by good works that we do for God. If we would go that route, we must understand that God demands that we be perfect in all our thoughts, words, and deeds.

None of us can pull that off. Therefore, we are invited by Paul to put our confidence in the perfect Son of God who became one of us to live a perfect life on our behalf. We are invited to put our confidence in the righteousness that comes through faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Paul writes of his own personal goodness in this way: "I count everything [all my good works] 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 [all good works] as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

We count all our righteousness, our good works, and good intentions as loss and rubbish - as nothing but garbage. The only thing that is truly good and valuable is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Son of God became one of us to righteously live for us, from start to finish, so that we might be declared righteous by faith in him. Not only that, but he took to himself all of our unrighteousness - all of our sin and death and damnation into himself on the cross so that we might be welcomed into heaven and one day be perfect as he is perfect. We have been baptized into Jesus' death, our sins have been washed away, and the righteousness of Jesus has been imputed, credited, ascribed to us so that God now counts us righteous in his sight.

Since we have been given this righteousness through Jesus, we press on toward the certain hope of resurrection. In other words, we forget what is behind [our sins] and we strain forward to what lies ahead. And what lies before us is mentioned in Isaiah 43:20-21, "I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my

praise.” We strain forward to the life that is ours in Jesus! But let us be sure to note at this point that we do *strain* forward. What do you think Paul means when he says that we *strain* forward? Well, our Christian experience is not an easy one by any stretch. Like we said - perhaps we don’t particularly like Lent or *enjoy* it at all - but we sure do need it. Indeed, it keeps us on the way to life.

We need it because we are still in danger of losing the righteousness that is ours in Jesus. We are always in danger of losing the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ. Harlyn J. Kuschel in his commentary on *Philippians* puts it in this way:

The Christian who does not concentrate on living the kind of life to which God calls him may, like the overconfident athlete, be eliminated from the race and in the end lose the blessings God has in store for him. A believers sanctification - that is, his life as a Christian in this world - will never be perfect. The struggle against sin and the devil must be carried on as long as the Christian is in this world. Neither Paul nor any other Christian can ever afford a lack of concentration or think that the race is as good as won.

The apostle Paul concentrated and pressed on so that he could take hold of that for which Christ Jesus had taken hold of him. Like the apostle we have been brought to faith in Jesus. We know and believe that all of our sins have been paid for in full by his perfect life and sufferings. We have everything to look forward to in the presence of the living God. The joy of being with him forever is the prize. And our Savior Jesus by his Holy Spirit provides the spiritual power that we need to overcome all that is against us. Jesus has reached out and taken hold of us in the gospel and sacraments.

Now, if our destination is really to be with Jesus, then consider how different our way of thinking will be. We will see life with a greater urgency than ever before. Since we are headed for the goal, we will keep our eyes on the goal, for there is nothing more important than finally reaching it. And we pray that we will not be persuaded to go down a different road. The way that leads to life is one of ongoing sorrow over sin and rejoicing in the forgiveness of Jesus. In him we press on!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott