

Sermon – “Suffering Gain”

Sunday, April 7, 2019

Scripture Readings: Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

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Our first reading comes from Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. Listen to his writing in Philippians 3:4b-14, as he speaks of casting away the things he stood on before and taking up what matters more.

*<sup>4b</sup>If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

*<sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

*<sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup>Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 12, verses 1 through 8. This is near the end of Jesus’s ministry, as he is approaching the day of his crucifixion, in a moment where he stops in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who have experienced Jesus miraculously bringing Lazarus back from the dead. Listen for the word of God to you.

*<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”*

Usually it is the case that a preacher is building upon thoughts that have been expressed by other commentators. Today I intend to piggyback and build further on ideas raised in our own pulpit two weeks ago.

We were blessed with thoughtful words from several members of our church that day. Mr. Zerfas spoke about transformative experience and the way it can change your outlook and your purpose. Ms. Batterman considered one of her own childhood experiences and how it was for her an awakening to the powerful concept of forgiveness and a pointer toward reliance on the overwhelming grace found in God's forgiveness. Mr. Knox explored the notion of living life with confidence and maintaining faith with confidence.<sup>1</sup>

It so happens that today's readings are also connected to all of these notions. Paul writes to the Philippians of a massive transformation in the fundamental basis on which he lives his life. Everything he gained in his previous pursuits is now "rubbish" to him!<sup>2</sup> We know from elsewhere in scripture of the dramatic nature of this turnaround—struck blind by a vision and hearing the voice of Jesus Christ, meeting the one against whom his life had been set, having his eyes then opened both figuratively and literally, and having to throw away much of what he had thought important beyond measure.<sup>3</sup>

And it was powerful, but grace-filled also. He had been persecuting the followers of Christ and seeing them killed. Yet the vision Paul received was not one of condemnation but one calling him on a journey out of this evil. In today's passage, he is painfully aware he has been given grace, after having built his personal pride upon terrorizing Christians.<sup>4</sup>

Mary of Bethany, heard of in the second reading, had her life transformed by grace as well. She has seen her brother raised from the dead!<sup>5</sup> And she may, or may not be, the woman in the extremely similar story from Luke, where the woman anointing Jesus's feet with expensive perfume is clearly expressing gratitude for his forgiveness of the many sins of her life.<sup>6</sup>

As for the subject of confidence, our first reading is takes that up directly. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh," says Paul, "I have more," listing a whole catalogue of reasons he could proudly hold a confident position in his society.<sup>7</sup>

Matthew Knox told us two weeks ago of his at-first puzzling experience with confidence, growing in his understanding of it through his competitive swimming, and I could not help but be reminded of my own high school sports career.

I was not a natural as a wrestler. I tried it first in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and...did not win very much. The following year, I won more, but maybe for little reason other than being older than most of my opponents. A broken leg knocked me out of my whole freshman season, which left me facing high school-level opponents for the first time as a sophomore. It did not go very well. And yes, it all was partly about experience, and partly about age and strength, but the best marker for mapping out my high school wrestling years might well be the one Matthew identified: confidence.

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<sup>1</sup> Referring here to the several youth sermons preached on March 24, 2019, collectively entitled "One Thing".

<sup>2</sup> See Philippians 3:7-8.

<sup>3</sup> See Acts 9:1-30.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 7:54-8:3, and Acts 9:1-2.

<sup>5</sup> The story of the raising of Lazarus is told in John 11:1-44.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 7:36-50 tells an extremely similar story but appears to set it in a different person's house. It is debated whether these two passages refer to the same incident and woman or not.

<sup>7</sup> See Philippians 3:4b-6; quotations from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

My sophomore year, I just hoped I could keep my shoulders off the matt until the end and avoid getting pinned. My junior year, after a few moments of more success than I was used to, I found I spent half the time in my matches thinking, "I could win this!" Not coincidentally, I probably won about half my matches that year, because mentally *examining* the idea of possibly winning, turning it over and over in one's mind as a surprising and intriguing idea, while right in the middle of an intense physical contest, is not in fact a headspace that produces actual wins.

My senior year, though, with more strength, conditioning, and confidence, I hit a different stride. I found a point where I simply *expected* to win. And this might surprise you unless you have wrestled or had some other extended experience of pushing yourself as hard as you possibly can, but wrestling is only half a physical sport. Maybe less than half. The mental piece is what I had been missing, and I could then observe the same thing missing in some of my opponents. There is a moment just before the match begins, when you shake hands with the wrestler you are about to face, and there were matches I could tell that I won in that moment alone, before the referee's whistle even started us going. I could tell that because a year earlier I had been the other guy, the one who would falter internally with doubt in that instant of coming face-to-face, who just hoped to be able to keep up with my adversary and pull off a win; while he knew from the beginning he was going to win and went straight to the task without fear.

It was an interesting lesson, and I gained a lot from it. But here's the important thing: it wasn't the whole lesson. Because here's what happened at the end of the season. I went home from the conference tournament as the champion of my weight class. Two weeks later, I went to the regional tournament, where I was stunned to lose my first match. I won my second, an easier rematch against the same, now clearly disheartened guy I had beat for the conference title two weeks earlier...and then promptly got taken down and defeated in my third, eliminating me altogether.

This was devastating. I had planned on going to the state tournament. That had been my goal and dedicated pursuit for three years, and this was to be my year. I knew I would be facing tough work at the sectional level, but two unexpectedly capable wrestlers had knocked me right out of the running on day one of regionals, and my entire high school wrestling career was over, just like that.

It would not be an exaggeration to say it took a whole year for me to recover from that. I had been running so long on the familiar ground of simply picking up again and trying harder the next day that I had no idea what to do with there being no "next day" anymore. It was a long and difficult road for me to come to understand that this defeat was, in the long run, an even more important lesson about confidence than the first one. And it might be this sort of lesson that led Paul to write as he did in Philippians.

One thing you might start noticing everywhere if you look for it is that our culture is full of celebrating things that might be termed almost-virtues, or near-virtues. These are substitute virtues, close enough in appearance to real virtues that we accept them readily without much thinking about them, but which in reality have a completely different underlying foundation than the true virtues they pretend to be.

A big one has to do with confidence. We like confidence. We value confidence, and for good reason. Teenage wrestling Trajan discovered something big when he recognized the extent to which confidence could change the outcome of extremely difficult tasks. But in a broader sense, it makes or breaks our everyday lives. Confidence gets us out of bed. It gets us doing, living, being productive. That very basic assurance that living the day is worthwhile, and that we have a place in the world, is essential. When people lack it—and I have been there, too—it is a condition that sucks away one’s life.

It is called despair, and we naturally reject it. We want to get out of it, and once out of it, don’t want to get anywhere near it again. Sometimes it even affects our willingness to partake of the church, to tread the road to the cross. I have heard more than one person over the years mention to me a distaste for the hymn “Amazing Grace,” because of the phrase “a wretch like me.” Wretchedness is language of failure and despair, and nevermind that the song is about being saved from it, even going near it can make us uncomfortable.

Gloom and self-flagellation drag us down and work against our confidence and sense of self, so we understandably keep at arm’s length the things that threaten our self-assurance. Why should we spend time thinking about sin, penitence, and contrition? It seems counter-productive to occupy a mental space that can defeat us, just as the wrestler or swimmer who spends today’s match worrying about repeating yesterday’s loss will probably do exactly that.

The problem, of course, is that here and there we can’t help but encounter moments that remind us all the self-confidence in the world is built on fragile illusion. One of the hardest things for me in the wake of the collapse of my years-long pursuit of a state-level finish on the wrestling mat was the implications it suggested beyond wrestling. (It didn’t help that I went from there only a few months later straight into the toughest academic environment I had ever faced.) If you had asked me during that period of time my biggest fear of all, I would have answered that it was the possibility that in the whole of life, faith, and everything, I would not in the end turn out to have what it took.

I didn’t yet understand that this is not a possibility; it is a given. Not having what it takes, in the biggest sense, is the *starting point* for our wrestling with our human condition. This is why confidence is such a hard problem. Lacking it and despairing of ourselves leads straight to defeat. But maintaining confidence in ourselves runs into the brick wall of objective reality. Somehow we jump between the options of losing hope, believing that we are not and can never be good enough, or casting away that desolation by asserting self-confidence, believing that we are or can be good enough. Some people oscillate wildly between the two. Probably all of us traverse this full spectrum at some point.

But the whole thing is false. These aren’t the only options. We don’t have to choose between a demonstrably false assertion that we’ve got what it takes to do life right and a resignation to failure. We—Christians—claim there is a God who gave us our lives and who is the source of all the purpose and energy in them. We proclaim that God’s son, Jesus, came to earth to break the grip of the sins of which we despair, and to restore our expectation for real hope. We claim there is a Holy Spirit who resides in believers and energizes them with wisdom, capability, and gifts.

In other words, *self*-confidence is not the only kind. Why should you keep your head up in life? Because you are, of yourself, enough? Or because you are, in Christ, enough? Paul has strong words to say about that. “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more,” he declares, and then promptly dismisses all of it as rubbish.<sup>8</sup> And it is. Now some people are highly attuned to their own inadequacies and cannot really find the strength to have much self-confidence in the first place. Others get a lot of mileage out of the fuel of believing in themselves. But ultimately they will always come under assault from realities that prove them wrong, and they are forced either to collapse into despair or play every psychological trick possible to avoid coming into contact with the things that threaten their confident ways of seeing themselves.

We do not have the power to save ourselves, cure ourselves, resurrect ourselves, restore everything we have made wrong. We cannot see well enough to perfect our own vision, cannot understand well enough to correct our own confusion. We cannot even *perceive* most of the ways we fall short, or the ways we do damage to ourselves and those around us. Self-confidence is simply a mistake. It is a substitute virtue, sounding right, but not matching reality. We build it and maintain it only by constructing armor that prevents deep self-contemplation of certain parts of ourselves, at great cost to those around us.

Why is it tempting anyway? Because we need confidence to function. But it matters where we put the source of our confidence in life. Jesus said, “Have faith.”<sup>9</sup> But Jesus never said to anyone, “Have faith in yourself.” Self-confidence is trying to meet a real need, but is ultimately a feeble substitute for Christ-confidence. The boldness or fearlessness of self-assuredness is a weak stand-in for the boldness or fearlessness of Christ-assuredness. We face challenge and hardship in life. If we aren’t to shrink under it, we must adopt some kind of stance of confidence. If we aren’t to be defeated, we must adopt one that isn’t rubbish.

So let us be purposeful about where we set our assurance. “I am enough to meet this moment” is a different assertion than “God put me in this moment to meet this moment.” Both are supremely confident statements, but they rest on different foundations. If you are sitting on the wrong one, as Paul openly admits to have been doing, it is a catastrophic event to have it pulled from under you without warning. He has “suffered the loss of all things”<sup>10</sup> in his abandonment of his former life. But ultimately he has suffered a gain. His eyes were opened, painfully, to see what was real and lasting and what was not.

We may never have quite as dramatic a redirection in life as Paul, but we, too, surely have suffered blows making suspect our belief in ourselves; and in us, too, the Spirit whispers—or occasionally shouts—of a truer hope, greater than we can imagine. Let us, like Paul, “press on,” “straining forward to what lies ahead.”<sup>11</sup> Let us exercise our faith daily, in prayer and moments—even short ones—of spiritual pause and contemplation. Let us give our Christ-confidence the chance to be strengthened by bearing real weight, by letting real-world decisions and purposes be formed upon it. And may God grant us the blessing of spiritually open eyes, which can see and tell us, always, of the unshakable love of Jesus Christ, the rock upon whom we are built. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> See Philippians 3:4b-8 and onward; quotes from *NRSV*.

<sup>9</sup> See Matthew 17:20, Matthew 21:21, Mark 11:22, and surrounding verses.

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 3:8 (*NRSV*).

<sup>11</sup> From Philippians 3:8-9 (*NRSV*).