

## 5 Lent, Year C: 24 March 2013

“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 and be found in him.”  
These are very autobiographical lines from Paul,  
who once thought he had all the answers,  
but found out differently on the road to Damascus.

It’s important to note that the Greek word we translate as “rubbish”  
actually means “excrement,” which shows you how strongly Paul feels about this.  
“Yes, everything I once thought so important is gone from my life.  
Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ as my Master firsthand,  
everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—so much bull hockey.  
I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him.”

Now Paul isn’t *really* saying that the good things of life are not good,  
but it’s the comparison—all else pales in significance  
when you look at the joy that knowing Christ, gaining Christ, gives us.  
Other things—the beauties of nature, good food, family, friends—  
can be a part of that, can even contribute to that goal.  
Insofar as they do, then we should enjoy them as gifts from God.  
But insofar as they get in the way, distract us, even take the place of Christ in our life,  
then we must count them as loss—dump them in the trash, so to speak.

Also, as we all know well,  
even the good things of life, gifts from God for our enjoyment, are perishable.  
Natural disasters, death, or even loss of family and loved ones,  
our own physical frailties and impending deaths are inevitable.  
It is indeed true that only Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

So what *is* it that *really* matters?

Paul is very clear about this:

“I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection  
and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.”

Note that the *power* is in the *resurrection* of Christ.

Each year during Holy Week we focus on Jesus’ passion and death,  
and that is a necessary part of our journey to Easter.

But even this deep in the heart of Lent,

we do not lose sight of the fact that we are *Easter* people.

Remember the Lenten admonition to “*prepare with joy* for the Paschal feast.”

It has been said, and truly, that you can’t have Easter without Good Friday.

But Good Friday wouldn’t *be* “good” if it weren’t for Easter.

As the Orthodox have it, the sorrow of Good Friday is a “bright sadness.”

If Jesus had simply suffered and died,  
and that was the end of the story,  
why would we want to share in his suffering?  
In fact, if we were putting our trust in a Christ who was *not* raised from the dead,  
we would be, as Paul tells us in another passage, “of all people most to be pitied.”

So how are we to “share in his sufferings?”  
Perhaps during Lent we have practiced some kind of “fasting”:  
in the kinds or quantities of food we eat,  
or in our enjoyment of some other pleasures.  
Or perhaps we’ve chosen instead  
to take on some spiritual discipline for this holy season.  
These are very small ways to share in Christ’s suffering,  
to become like him in his death.

Perhaps we can do something more.  
Remember what Paul says only a little earlier in this same letter:  
“Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave....”  
How often do *we*, created in the image and likeness of God, attempt to exploit that gift?

Perhaps what it means to share in Christ’s suffering  
is that we need to empty *ourselves*,  
to see our own self-importance as insignificant loss—  
to focus on others and not just on our own concerns  
and the concerns of those near and dear to us.  
Jesus said that whatever we do to the marginalized,  
those he called his brothers and sisters,  
we do to, or for, him.  
How might we set our “full of ourselves” lives aside  
so that we might become slaves of those in need?  
How might we enter into the suffering of those brothers and sisters—  
the sick, the poor, the homeless or hungry, those who are alone?  
It’s not too late to make that a part of our Lenten practice.  
In fact, we can and should do it *anytime*, no matter what the season.

Never doubt that you *have* the capacity to *do* these things.  
The victory of Christ’s suffering love does not merely set us an example,  
showing us what we *might* achieve if we imitate him.  
Much more than this, it has a creative effect on us,  
transforming our hearts and wills, making us whole,  
making it possible for us to love in a way that would have been impossible  
if we had not first been loved by him.  
Because in love he has identified himself with us, *his* victory is *our* victory.  
*This* is the value of the Cross for us.

As I have preached before,  
Christ offers us, not a way *around* suffering, but a way *through* it.  
And so we pray with Paul that our suffering might be like Christ's—  
compassionate, creative, transforming—  
because here is real power indeed!

At the end of this passage, Paul tells us,  
“This 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 heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

The message is that what lies behind is *done*.  
Maybe we've done some really good things in our life.  
Maybe we've done some really good things this Lent.  
If so, that is fine and appropriate, but now is no time to stop and say,  
“There! I've done it. Now I can relax.”  
In fact, there is *no* good time to do that.  
Our call to gain Christ and to know Christ and the power of his resurrection  
is a *lifelong* call; we must “*press on*.”

But maybe we *haven't* done such a good job this Lent.  
Maybe we had good intentions but didn't follow through with them.  
Maybe, in fact, we fell flat on our faces.  
Maybe we haven't even done such a good job with our lives as a whole,  
and there are sins in our past that are weighing us down.  
Well, even so, here's the Good News: we can put all *that* behind us, too.  
If we repent and confess our sins, we know that God is ever ready to forgive us.  
“As far as the east is from the west, so far shall I remove your sins from you,”  
says God in Psalm 103.

So, whatever we've done or failed to do this Lent,  
whatever we've done or failed to do our *whole lives long*,  
there's just one thing we need to do now:  
*forget* what lies behind and *strain forward* to what lies ahead.  
Because what lies ahead, for the Christian,  
is God's summons to ascend and join Christ in eternal life.  
Christ has won for us the victory,  
and even though right now, from where we stand in Lent,  
the brightness of that victory is hidden,  
still we look forward to Easter when it will be made manifest.  
God raises Christ from the dead  
and by his rising delivers us from anxiety and terror:  
the victory of suffering love is confirmed,  
love is openly shown to be stronger than hatred,  
and life to be stronger than death.  
Indeed, because it is *God* who has died and risen from the dead,  
there *is* no more death as nothingness forever: even death is filled with God.

In anticipation of this ultimate victory, our Passover,  
may we indeed prepare with joy,  
and may we join our voices with Paul and say:  
“...I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus.  
I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back.”  
Amen.