

## Christ Surpassing All

### **Mary, Paul and Dare to Care**

*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.*

**Let's talk about the weather a bit.** I have always wanted to have a law enacted – perhaps call it the “Camelot Law” where upon it is declared that if the weather becomes perfect enough – in temperature, sun, humidity – then a national holiday is declared and businesses, schools, etc. are all closed for the day. I wouldn't mind including houses of worship in that – but now you are seeing the pagan side of me coming out.

Yesterday was approaching such parameters as a beautiful spring day. It was also a spring day that fell within an auspicious weekend - a weekend of March madness; of yard work to be done, of gardens to be readied.

**You know what I saw yesterday?** I saw something special on that spring day. I saw this group of 25-30 people giving up a beautiful Saturday morning and afternoon – one that approached perfection, in order to collect, sort, and hand out some food to whoever walked in the door of Saints Hall. And the strange thing is that they seemed to be glad to be there. I think they happily chose to be there. They seemed to be actually smiling about it to me.

**Now, this is not as dramatic as a Mary in our Gospel story,** who, while hiding out with the fugitives Jesus and Lazarus (for both of whom, John tells us, there was an organized movement to have them killed), and sensing perhaps that their days were numbered, walked into the room full of men, let down her hair and threw out the window any sense of social decorum, sexual proprieties and any concern for the judgment of her peers; in order to do something she thought needed to be done. And our Saturday feeding crew may not be as dramatic as the apostle Paul, who we encounter in our Epistle reading confined to a dark, dank, smelly prison, and on trial for his life, who would never-the-less say to you, if you were visiting him there, “This is where I want to be. This is OK for it is where I am following Christ right now.”

**So, the fact of those St. Matthews people being there on a perfect Saturday morning may not be as dramatic, but it is of the same kind.** It is of the same kind of choosing. It is born of the same realization that both Mary and Paul had – that to know Christ and the power of his rising, to share in his suffering and conform to his death is really worth the trade offs. It is worth beautiful spring mornings, or long night meetings, or early Sunday mornings and, even, endless emails. It is a piece of the same spirit from those who have an inkling of what Paul and Mary are on about in our texts this morning.

## All Things as Rubbish

*For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.*

Even further, let me first say that I think most of us here this morning know something of what Paul is talking about here. For while this may sound like some form of extreme religious fervor, I think most of us actually do have something in our lives for which we would, if needed, hand over our wealth, our vocation, our dignity, or our social standing. Despite the anxiety and effort we put into establishing our own versions of “confidence in the flesh”, there are situations where most of us know we would count it all as rubbish if it really came down to it: perhaps for our own health, or the sake of children and family members; for some it may be a vocation or cause; for others perhaps it is for camaraderie, citizenship, country or community. And for those of us who cannot think of something for which we would perhaps give up our all – there is an invitation in Christ to find something worth dying for (which is just the flip side of having something worth living for). Most of us here this morning so know of what Paul speaks. Most of us would do as Mary did, if it really came down to it – and throw all social reputation, pride or dignity out the window.

Our challenge, then, I think, is not to understand how one could love so much, or be devoted so much as to act as Paul or Mary did. **Our challenge is to understand this:** What did Mary and Paul understand, and see in Christ, that Judas did not? What did they see in Christ that made it worth their very all? And how do we come to be like them in that way – to know in our hearts and practice in our lives, that those things of social standing and material security are really nothing to us compared to our desire to know Christ and the power of his rising; to share in his suffering and conform to his death? How can we live a life of faith such that we would be as willing and able to walk away from it all, or give it all away, or spend it all – for knowing Christ; as much as we would be willing also for our children and family, or vocation or community or whatever it is that we already love that deeply. That’s the challenge.

**That is, of course, a life long question. But here we have Paul’s text before us, so let’s start there.** What does Paul say that he so valued in Christ? Let me share with you four surpassing freedoms I see here that Paul has found in Christ: Freedom to Fail; Freedom to Die; Freedom to Belong; and Freedom to Forget.

### **Freedom to Fail: A Rightness Based on Faith, Not Performance**

*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.*

What is the difference between living by law and living by faith? What is so valuable about being made OK not by law, but by faith?

**[Story of the wife and two husbands and the list in the attic.]** The former husband was cruel and demanding, the new husband liked her as she was, and loved her for herself. While the list could not be kept for fear, it could be kept for love. That is righteousness by faith.

What is that worth to you - an opportunity to be your own good self and not have to measure up to someone else's idea of what you should be? What's it worth to you to be accepted and loved for who you truly are? For that is life by faith. That is life in Christ.

### **The Freedom to Die: And therefore live**

*<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.*

I can understand the resurrection part, but why would one want to become like Christ in his death? I think this is something the Saturday food crew was living out by feeding the poor on a perfect spring day. Think about what such a death can do for us. It can get yourself out of the way and to be free of the tyranny of selfishness. To not to have to be special, or noticed, or appreciated, or seen as right – to not have to be the center of the universe or the center of hell. To be just free to live or die as your heart dictates based on your truth and your abiding relationship with God. To always have the capacity to pro-act, and not react. To be always able to choose to love and let yourself be loved based solely on the rightness of it, and not on neediness, or guilt, or regret, or addiction, or denial, or childhood wishes. To speak or be silent, to give or withhold, to serve or be served – all based on purity of heart and clarity of soul. That, I think, is knowing the power of resurrected (recovered) life, to share in merciful and redemptive suffering of Christ, and conforming to death as Christ conformed to it. It is the very freedom to live from the heart, and not from fear or any lesser thing. What would that be worth? How surpassing?

### **The Freedom to Belong: To Know Whose I Am**

*<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.*

During our Lenten suppers and studies, The Bishop is doing one of his favorite things – teaching the great sweep of God's plan of salvation and redemption. And one of the points he makes about that story is how the central question of life is not to know who you are, but to know whose you are – that you are God's people; created to live in fellowship with God. That is the central question of faith, for from it flows all other answers. He also read his favorite line from the baptismal covenant in the Prayer Book:

*Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.*

Here is a question about freedom: How would you live if you knew you knew that your heavenly eternity was already secure? That you did not need to be good to please God - God is already pleased. You do not need to try to make it to heaven – you have already made it. "Christ Jesus has made me his own" Paul says.

**The bishop also described how, each morning, when he takes a shower, he uses that moment of water flowing over him to remember his baptism, and to let that baptism remind him whose he is. How different it would be for us, if instead of going into our day trying to prove**

who we are, or trying to prove we are OK, or trying to discover where we belonged – that instead we just know, deep in our hearts, whose we are and why we are and where we are. What would it be worth to you to have nothing to prove and nothing to lose? How different would your day be? How different your choices? How much easier or bolder or truer? What would that be worth? How surpassing?

**And finally:**

### **The Freedom to Forget: To Live in Forgetful Forgiveness**

*<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.*

How much of our lives are spent replaying the past? Or responding to the past, or recovering the past, or running from the past? How much energy goes into that which lies behind, rather than what is at the present moment or what lies ahead? For in Christ, Paul has found a freedom to forget. That forgetfulness comes from the freedoms we have already described – the freedom to fail, the freedom to die and the freedom to belong – these all lead to the freedom to forget and forgive and forge ahead. In Christ, Paul has found only newness – each moment is new, each day begins anew. What is that worth? How surpassing would that be?

### **The Surpassing**

This is the relationship with God that makes everything else seem as rubbish in comparison. This is the way of the cross, which is the path of freedom. Seeing this in Christ is what gave Mary the strength to do what her heart said to do – no matter the reaction, the ridicule or the risk. Knowing this in Christ is what gave Paul the strength to be in jail and persevere in faith. This is what Mary and Paul recognized in Jesus that Judas did not. What strength could it give to you? What shape would it give your life?

Hear the invitation to the Gospel of Christ.

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