

Chosen

Psalm 146 and Galatians 1:11-24

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Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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¹¹ For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹² for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; ¹⁹ but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰ In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²² and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³ they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

I have a question for you, and I worry that when I ask the question, you are going to spend the rest of the service thinking about it. So, please don't do that, but here's the question: **Can you remember the most difficult letter you ever wrote?**

Who did you write to? What was it about? Can you still remember the language you used? Would you change anything about it today, now that you have more distance from it?

I can remember a few difficult letters.

And the truth is, I hated to write them, every single one of them. My stomach would be in knots. My heart would be racing. I would be perspiring from the effort. You wouldn't think that the simple task of writing a letter would involve the whole cardio-vascular system. Sometimes I would be bearing down so hard that I would break the tip off my pencil. (The equivalent today, I suppose, would be bashing the keyboard to bits.)

It's always better, when we have a difficult letter to write, to wait until the next morning – in other words, to sleep on it, and to get a little distance from it. Coming back to a difficult letter the next day always seems to help...at least a little.

In fact, more than once, over the years, I have deleted letters altogether. I would write them, full of anger and indignation, I would use insulting language, not quite like Donald Trump, but close, and then the next day I would delete it. I would get rid of it.

And in hindsight, I am glad all of those letters were deleted. They helped me to express my anger – temporarily, at least – but sending them would have not have achieved very much. In fact, just the opposite. Those letters would have done more harm than good.

I thought of all that last week in connection with this letter from Paul to the Galatians. This is one of those difficult letters. You may want to take some time this week to read it in its entirety. It's a beautiful letter in many places, but Paul was angry when he wrote it. He was angry that he had to write it.

And he had every right to be angry. His integrity had been questioned. His teaching had been challenged. Even his authority was being undermined.

And he was mad about it, as you and I would have been.

As some of you know, Paul often dictated his letters to a traveling companion or a secretary, but in the case of this letter to the Galatians he wrote at least the last part of the letter in his own hand. **“Look,”** he writes, in the last chapter, **“my eye sight isn't very good, so my letters are large, but this is me, Paul. I am the one writing this letter.”**

Do you know something? I like it that Paul was angry and upset. I like it that he lets his true feelings show. I like it that we get to see him as he really is. Red face, veins in his neck bulging.

I have had coaches over the years, football coaches, who would appear to be very angry. They would throw their clipboards on the ground or kick a folding chair or do something to show us how angry they were about how badly we were playing.

But I think we knew what was genuine and what wasn't. We knew when the coach was acting and when he really meant it. Sometimes, during the tantrum, we would look at each other and smile, as if to say, **“Wow, that's worthy of an Academy Award.”**

I think it's possible to know here – in this letter – whether or not Paul really means what he is writing. I would say that he really meant it. This is was not a little theater to get everyone's attention. This was the real thing. Paul is charged up. Something has happened that has left him shaking.

And frankly, if I had received this letter, if I had been a member of the church where this letter was read aloud, which is how Paul's letter were used at the beginning, I would have sat up and paid attention.

On the surface, what Paul is writing about is not much of an issue today. Whether or not circumcision should be required for new Christians is not really an issue today, is it? I think we can say that issue has been settled or mostly settled.

But what lies just beneath the surface – the issues of integrity and authority and so on – those are just as real and just as important today as they were way back in the first century. When someone questions your integrity, or your motives for doing something, or your honesty, or your right to have an opinion – why, you would be angry too.

And you would write a 500 word email about it and copy all of your close friends and maybe the leadership in your *Gemeinde*. And you would press the send button.

Look, I think the Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, who did more than anyone to establish the church in world, who worked harder than any other missionary in the history of the church, and who gave his life in process – I think the Apostle Paul is often unjustly criticized for boastfulness.

Every now and then you catch of little glimpse of what seems like boasting or bragging. He will review his credentials, as he does here in the verses you heard, and at first it just doesn't sound right: **“I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age,”** he writes.

And at first we think, **“Oh, you shouldn't do that. You shouldn't let everyone know where you went to school, or who you studied with, or that you graduated first in your class. You should be more modest.”**

But the truth is, Paul is not bragging. Whenever he mentions his credentials, as he does here, he is under attack. Someone has said about Paul, **“He doesn't know what he's talking about.”**

And then, Paul will review his resume for us, his *Lebenslauf*. As if to say, **“Actually, I do know what I'm talking about.”**

You know, there's a difference between bragging and boastfulness (on the one hand) and the sort of Christian character that Paul demonstrates for us (on the other). And as the American pastor John Piper likes to say, **“this is not advanced discipleship, this is basic Christianity.”** You and I, if we are serious about our faith, need to get this right.

So, let me see if I can put this very simply. Paul always knew who he was. He was a sinner forgiven by God. He would have been lost but for the grace of God given to him through Jesus Christ. That was his identity.

And frankly, he wished for no other. All of his successes and all of his degrees and everything that counts for something in popular culture, he counted as rubbish.

Philippians 3:8 puts it well: **“I regard everything as loss,”** Paul writes, **“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.”**

I don't think you can make the case that Paul was boastful or full of himself or a braggart. The truth is, he understood who he was better than most of us. You and I could learn something from him about Christian identity.

When I was quite a bit younger, I had my diplomas nicely matted and framed, and I hung them on the wall where everyone could see them. The diplomas from Princeton are in Latin, and so for that reason alone they are very impressive. Who knows what they say? Maybe they say, “Whoever puts this on the wall doesn't really deserve the degree.”

Anyway, every time I moved, I would bring them with me to my new office, and I would nail them on the wall. I was very proud.

And then one day – I know exactly when this happened – I decided to put them in the closet ... in other words, out of sight. I remember preaching a sermon in which I said from the pulpit – so confident that I knew what I was talking about – that our baptisms were the only credentials that really mattered.

The rest of it, I said, everything else was rubbish.

And then, as often happens, I felt convicted by my own words, so into the closet went my diplomas.

Sometime later, I happened to be serving a church in an academic community, and I told that story. No more diplomas on my wall. Rubbish. Et cetera. The story I just told you. And after the service, at the door while I was greeting, a man approached me, and in a voice that I thought was a lot louder than necessary, he let me know how hard he had worked on his degrees and how hard he had worked to get into the schools that granted his degrees and how *his* diplomas were going to stay on the wall.

And I remember being shaken. No one had ever shouted at me before at the door of the church. People usually go home and write long emails, if they disagree, but not that. This man was so upset that he confronted me within minutes after worship.

And by the way, I have nothing against diplomas and graduate degrees. When my dermatologist is about to slice away some bad skin cells on my back or chest or leg, I like to look over her shoulder and see the medical degree hanging on the wall.

So, this is not about having demonstrated competence in your field. There are times when I want to know that you are competent in your field!

What this is about is how we see ourselves. This is about our identity. This is about what's important to us. This is about what we value most in life.

In Matthew's gospel (Luke has these words too, though in a slightly different form, but in Matthew's gospel), Jesus says, **“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth**

nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

That’s the key, isn’t it? It’s so simple. What do you value most?

When a group of people had the poor judgment to suggest that Paul didn’t know what he was talking about, Paul rose up to his full height (which wasn’t very much because apparently he wasn’t very tall), and Paul said, **“Look here, I do know what I’m talking about. I am speaking because of a revelation I had from Jesus Christ.”**

But he wasn’t bragging or claiming any special status within the church of Jesus Christ. To him it was a simple statement of fact.

Let me ask you another question. If you are still thinking about the difficult letter I asked about at the beginning, please think about this other question: Where is your treasure?

As Paul knew, as Jesus knew, as every person knows who tries to live the Christian life, that may be one of the most important questions that can be asked. Where is your treasure? What is that you value most?

In the last six months I watched as my mother downsized from the condominium where she lived with my father for quite a few years.

She moved into a small apartment in a retirement complex. Many of you have helped a parent do this. You know what this means. It’s very often traumatic and unsettling. Everything that has been accumulated over the years is sorted out. A few things can be kept. The rest has to be given away or sold or taken home by children and grandchildren. There was no room in the new apartment for the piano, for example, a piano that had been in her home for 50 years.

So, there she is now, my mother, in a living space that is a small fraction of what she once had, and she is surrounded by a few things that have meaning to her, mostly photographs, a few paintings that my dad painted, an iPad so that she can receive FaceTime calls from me. But that’s about all.

And at this point in her life – 89 years old – she is grappling with the **“where is your treasure?”** question. To her credit, I think she is getting it right – or she seems to be. She knows, I think, that her treasure is in heaven.

But the question is what about you? What is most precious to you? The Apostle Paul could say this without hesitation. Could you?

The American preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of a missionary family in China who was forced to leave the country in 1949, not long after the communists took control.

One day a group of soldiers knocked on the door and told a missionary, his wife, and their children that they had two hours to pack up before these troops would escort them to the train.

They would be permitted to take with them only two hundred pounds of stuff, not quite 91 kilos.

After years of living in this country, they suddenly had to decide – what should they take? What about this vase? It’s a family heirloom, so we’ve got to take the vase. Well, maybe so, but this typewriter is

brand new and we're not about to leave that behind. What about some books? Got to take a few of them along.

On and on it went, putting stuff on the bathroom scale and taking it off until finally they had a pile of possessions that totaled two hundred pounds on the dot.

At the appointed hour, the soldiers returned. **“Are you ready?”** they asked. **“Yes.”** **“Did you weigh your stuff?”** **“Yes, we did.”** **“Two hundred pounds?”** **“Yes, two hundred pounds on the dot.”** **“Did you weigh the kids?”** **“Um, . . . no.”** **“Weigh the kids!”**

And in an instant the vase, the typewriter, and the books all became rubbish. *Trash!* None of it meant anything compared to the surpassing value of the children.

I wonder, partly because I have thought about this many times over the years, what is it that is of surpassing value to you?

Hi, everybody. It's been a long time since you've seen me doing a children's sermon, isn't it. Well, I'm very excited to be here. And I have something really good planned for today.

Oh, wait a minute. I have a phone call. I can feel my phone vibrating. I have to take this. It's from my mom. Sorry, I'll just be a minute.

“Hi, mom. How are you? . . . Good, but I can't talk now. I am in worship. Yes, I'm doing the children's sermon today. And I'm really excited about it and have something really good planned. . . . Right, but I can't talk now. Can I call you later today? Okay, bye. Tshüss!”

Wow, I'm sorry about that. My mother doesn't usually call when I'm at church. Sorry for the interruption. Now, what were we talking about?

I was going to ask you if you knew how to pray. Do you know how to pray? What do you say?

Look, talking to God is a lot like talking to your mother. You tell her what's going on, you tell her if you're sad, you tell her when you're scared. That sort of thing. And usually your mother knows when you're sad or scared, doesn't she? But you tell her, and it feels good to tell her. Because then she puts her arms around you, and holds you, and tells you that everything is going to be okay.

Well, prayer is like that. It's having a conversation with someone who loves you and wants to take care of you and protect you and hold you. Next time you pray, will you remember that? You're talking with someone who loves you more than anything else in the world.

I would like to end today by praying the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray. One day they said, "Lord, teach us how to pray." And he said, "Okay, here is how you do it..."