

A sermon preached at St. George's Anglican Church Calgary, by the Rev. Clara King, October 8, 2017 (Canadian Thanksgiving)

Proper 27 – Year A

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

People think that Paul is bragging in this passage, when he rehearses all his accomplishments and claims to fame. But he's not boasting: he is setting up everything that he valued highly in his previous life like pins in a bowling lane, naming them off as he sets each pin upright: "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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." And then, having set it all up, an impressive array of things to be proud of, he takes his shot and strikes them all down: all this is as nothing compared with the surpassing value of knowing Christ and being known by him.

Moreover, Paul says, I could set up anything in my whole life, and nothing could compare to knowing Christ and being found in him.

This is profound, coming from Paul. Paul who used to be a prime persecutor of the Church. Paul, who found his identity and his status in his community by being a zealous and rigid interpreter of Jewish tradition. Paul, who in all things previously valued the social position and respect that came with being a pillar of the community.

And now, because of Christ, he is comparatively an outcast. He had lost all his status and social position and respect in the majority Jewish community. Yet he doesn't mourn that loss in the slightest, because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ, and being known by him.

This is Paul's conversion story – after the blinding light and heavenly apparition and voice-from-heaven experience, Paul's conversion story takes place over years of living into a new identity, and discovering what this new identity means about who and what he is. It is his story of learning to find joy in a completely new way in life.

Here he is, writing to the Philippians, who had also lost everything for Christ. Christians, under the Roman empire, were a disgraced and persecuted religious minority. They had no job security; they lost the patronage of wealthy Roman citizens – basically their social safety net; their businesses and social standing failed since they couldn't participate in civic life which was thoroughly pagan, and centered around worship of the Emperor. Everything that Paul gave up willingly for Christ, these Philippians have had to give up too... yet they're struggling to find the joy.

Instead of being filled with joy and united in joy, they were struggling with a bitter division between two members of the church; and we wonder: were members of the church starting to forget the joy that comes from knowing Christ and being known by him, and starting to resent all that they've given up in order to be part of this not-so-happy community?

Paul is writing to a community that may indeed be on a path to falling apart over this conflict. And yet, this is what Paul says to them: be joyful; focus on what is good; give thanks for the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ and being known by him; live together in harmony. Let a spirit of gratitude and joy for what you share in Christ fill you up again.

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This Thanksgiving, let us welcome the spirit of gratitude and joy for all that we share in Christ. Here at St. George's we are united by the joy of knowing Christ, and being known by him. If we have differences, they are nothing compared with the surpassing joy of knowing Christ together. If we face struggles, they are nothing compared with the surpassing joy of following Christ together. If we face hardships or divisions or past hurts or theological debates that threaten to divide us, they are nothing compared with the surpassing joy of being disciples of Christ together.

Things will threaten to overwhelm us; challenges will rise that seem to endanger us – but these are nothing, if only we remember, if only we remind ourselves, if only we keep solidly on the path, focusing on the surpassing joy, the incredible strength, the deep resilience that comes from knowing Christ, and being known by him – together.

Next weekend is our Diocesan synod. There is a vote about same-sex blessings in this Diocese. And it is threatening to tear our Diocese apart. We must not let it tear our parish apart, although we find ourselves on many different sides of this

issue. We must remain firm in our bonds of joy and affection with one another: remembering that *it is Christ* who brings us together, and that our joy in him surpasses all. And we must remember that Christ brings us together *even though we are very different from one another*; yet Christ asks us to be brothers and sisters, and to have joy together in him.

This Thanksgiving, let us give thanks for the surpassing joy that we share in knowing Christ and being known by him. Let us give thanks for the joy of sharing together in fellowship; and being united with one another across our many differences. Let us give thanks that Christ calls us together, to know one another and care for one another, when, without Christ we would never have met each other. Let us give thanks for the faith which is at the heart of all; and may our thankfulness and gratitude and joy help us run our race and press on, together, towards our goal.

Thanks be to God.

**Amen.**