


“Eyes on the Prize”
Sunday, October 8th, 2017
18th Sunday after Pentecost
Children’s Sabbath

 **Philippians 3:4b-14 (NRSV)**

This morning, Paul reminds the people who they are and what God has given them.

He then talks about what he has given up to follow Christ and suggest they will also need to make sacrifices for their faith.

Then he gives them the good news that anything they give up is worth the cost because of what God offers.

If we keep our eyes on the prize, we will know that following Jesus is worth the effort.

[YOUTH Read from MSG Bible]

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

Let us pray... Lord, we come to hear Paul this morning, talking to the church about focus. Help us to recognize the direction you are pointing us toward. Let us hear again what “real gain” is. Show us the prize we seek. In Jesus’ name, we pray.
Amen.

[MESSAGE]

It is important that we think about what Paul is trying to say here; it would be easy to hear this as arrogant and as advocacy for human striving to gain salvation.

That is not what this is about.

First, Paul is using a rhetorical technique common in his time.

His original listeners would not think he was being arrogant when he lists his credentials; they would see it as a normal technique for establishing credibility.

Also, Paul has an established relationship with this church; they would expect Paul to be candid.

Second, studying the way Paul selects his word usage indicates a variety of meanings that we might not be familiar with.

Bringing these together leads scholars to conclude that Paul is not talking about the necessity for human striving.

Rather, he is challenging us to a radical shift in perspective, redefining what “true gain” is.

Paul does this a lot in his writings – he presents new ways of understanding God that may challenge our traditions and our old habits.

At its heart, today’s text is a powerful conversion story that takes us beyond the Road to Damascus and deeper into Paul’s journey of faith.

Because of Christ, Paul’s perspective changed completely.

Things that were central to Paul – his sense of religious identity (*circumcision, member of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew, a Pharisee*), plus a healthy dose of pride in his own

achievements (*zeal and blamelessness before the law*) – could now be discarded.

Paul realized that his former identity was not nearly as important or valuable as his new identity in Christ.

It's not just his former religious life but "*everything*," "*all things*," that count as loss to Paul because of Christ.

The list of credentials and accomplishments Paul give us are "*status indicators*."

He is not bragging, he is testifying.

Paul is writing this letter from inside a prison cell and, in spite of his predicament, he says it was worth it to give up all the things that gave him that high status in the past.

Remember, Paul was a big deal before his conversion.

He was a prominent Pharisee who stayed in-good with the Romans by persecuting the followers of Jesus.

After his “*Road to Damascus*” experience, he gave up all status markers outside Christ.

The Philippians were citizens of a prosperous Roman colony.

Paul’s not-so-subtle suggestion is that they not exploit their privileges of Roman citizenship, choosing to take their status from Christ.

This was a radical new perspective for people in the ancient world; it may also be a radical new idea for us.

It is important to notice, however, that Paul does not renounce his past.

We see in other writings that he accepts his past and recognizes that shaped him.

He does not ask the Philippians to renounce their Roman citizenship either.

His idea is that our past identities, our national identities, our cultural identities are relativized as we find our “true status” in Jesus Christ.

This is important for us to hear.

We can look on our own lives – *for good or bad* – and recognize the things we have allowed to define us.

I have shared before that I have not always been a pastor; I had a very different life before.

There are parts of that life I would rather not be the definition of who I am today.

There are also times when I could boast, as Paul did, about my job, my possessions, and my accomplishments; these should not define me either.

Letting all of that go to find my status in Christ has made a huge difference in who I am today and that is the definition I choose to embrace.

However, I cannot and should not renounce the **truth** of my former life because those experiences shaped me and challenged me and tried me.

Reflecting on those things of our past that we “*count as loss*” helps us to appreciate the new status we enjoy as followers of Christ.

Jesus would not exploit his status and left it all behind to come to earth.

The living presence of the resurrected Christ turned the tables on the death-dealing markers of status that so many had come to regard as greater than God.

This Christ brought a new and true status symbol.

Our contemporary culture presents many all-to-familiar status markers.

Race, gender, houses, cars, degrees, position in the church, length of church membership, political party – we allow so many things to define us based on the superficial.

We often view our status as something that entitles us to something better than someone else should get based on their status.

Paul invites to take another look at status and think on things that truly matter.

Where can we do better at defining our identity as Christians while enriching our identity as Americans?

How might I use my identity as a Christian to enhance my identity as an employee?

Can I use my Christian identity to improve my identity as a student?

There are not criticisms, they are questions of self-awareness.

We must be self-aware to be empathetic.

Today we are recognizing Children's Sabbath and I can't help but think that this text has something to say to us about our children too.

It is our responsibility to teach our kids that the greatest gain in their life is their relationship with Jesus.

They need to understand that, no matter what happens in their life, Christ still defines who they are.

As they grow in knowledge and enjoy their own achievement, we must help them see the greater importance of Christ in their life.

We do not want to diminish their success or downplay their talent and their efforts; we simply want to be sure that their “*status priority*” is focused on God and not on themselves.

In a way, Paul’s message today is, “*You can’t take it with you.*”

For us and for our children, we need to always remember that God brought us into the world with nothing and we leave the same way.

From that perspective, everything is loss compared to the gain of Jesus Christ, so keep your eyes on the prize.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**