

The Last Sunday of Epiphany

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 February 2020

Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] Indeed, I count everything as lost because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

! In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Isn't it truly an amazing thing to know Jesus?

Isn't that the greatest thing in the entire world? Yeah, I was in the car with my daughter Mia on Friday, and she struck up a conversation with me about faith in God.

Now, we got to the issue of people who don't believe in God and how sometimes even believers struggle with doubts. In the course of the conversation, I admitted to her something that I think really surprised her.

There was a time in my life when I didn't believe in God. There was a time in my life when I did not know Jesus as my Lord.

[1:21] If she saw, for example, 15-year-old me, she'd see someone she probably wouldn't recognize at all as the daddy that she knows and loves.

She would see a cynical teenager whose ambition in life was to play music in a successful punk rock band. As I stand here this morning, it's pretty obvious that that goal didn't turn out the way that I expected at the time.

As Mia said in that conversation, man, people can really change. Now, to be clear, I still like loud and weird music.

Anyone who follows me on social media knows that. But my priorities and my values have changed to an incredible degree. So they do. Don't we see that in the example of the Apostle Paul's life?

He was a devout Pharisee who lived to persecute the church of Jesus Christ. He was on his way to do just that in Damascus when, well, what happened?

[2:37] Yep. He met Jesus, didn't he? And that encounter changed his entire life. And that wasn't just the kind of thing that happened a long time ago.

I want us to keep that in mind as we look at the Apostle Paul's experience in this morning's epistle reading from Philippians. Now, if Mia were to see 16-year-old me, she might see this.

Me, reading a Bible in my room, not even sure why I was doing it. And as I read, coming to the realization that I actually believe what I was reading.

That was a dramatic thing, too. I didn't get blinded or anything like that. But coming to know Jesus really did change everything.

Knowing Jesus changes lives. That's what we see in the example of Paul's witness in our epistle for this morning.

[3:47] And that shouldn't surprise us. Haven't you found that to be true in your own life? What does Paul have to teach us about knowing Jesus this morning?

Let's look at Philippians chapter 3 together. First thing we see is that knowing Jesus means knowing his incomparable worth.

If we were to look at the verses immediately preceding the passage we read just a minute ago, we would see Paul's description of his life as a Pharisee.

What was Paul's life like when he was a Pharisee? Well, he was really religious, he was really zealous, presumably really respected, steeped in the traditions of his fathers.

It was probably a nice life for him. In his cultural context, as a Jewish man and his time and place, he was kind of living the dream.

[5:02] Then he met Jesus and he had a change of perspective. Imagine that. He writes, Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. So Paul may have been, in the eyes of many, living the dream, but he considers all of that as less than nothing when compared to knowing Jesus.

Knowing Jesus is a greater gift than anything imaginable. Paul's testimony. His account here demonstrates that.

Paul goes on. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

For the sake of knowing Jesus, and obeying Jesus, Paul gave up everything that he would have once thought important.

[6:18] His respectable place in the community, as a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church, that was gone. It's likely that he came from a fairly influential family.

He was a Roman citizen, so that would seem to suggest so. But guess what? He ended up a traveling missionary for Christ, who had to support his missionary efforts with manual labor.

What about his sense that he was blameless under the law? Well, we'll look at that in more depth when we get to our next point here in a minute.

But needless to say, his self-righteousness was something that he lost too. We get the sense that there was a time in his life when that was very dear to him. To get a sense of what Paul lost, let's think about this description of his life in 2 Corinthians chapter 11.

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes, less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked.

[7:35] At night and a day I was adrift at sea. On frequent journeys in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers.

In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Okay.

Paul goes on, but I think you get the point. In coming to know Jesus, Paul lost all of the things, really, that he once would have thought were important.

He went through trials so severe in his service of Christ that these things are almost unimaginable to many of us. And what was Paul's testimony?

It was all worth it. Knowing Jesus, Paul tells us, it was worth it. My brothers and my sisters in this life, we so often face loss.

[8:54] We so often face hardship. We so often face pain. I know that some of you are dealing with trials in your own lives right now.

But Paul's life was a living example that shows us that no matter what we lose, no matter what trials we undergo, knowing Jesus is worth it all.

Knowing Christ means knowing the incomparable worth of Christ. Knowing Christ also means knowing Christ as our righteousness.

Paul writes in verse 8, For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

Paul is telling us that knowing Jesus as our righteousness is so much better than self-righteousness and proud religiosity.

[10:14] Think again about the description that Paul gives about his life before he knew Christ. He says, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

But what does he say about all of that? His self-righteousness and his zeal outside of Christ. He says, it's rubbish.

It's garbage. What he expresses here is that he wants to be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of his own, but having the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

I would say Paul is here expressing the value of what theologians call the imputed righteousness of Christ. We talked about that in Sunday school this morning.

Christ's perfect righteousness credited to our account through faith in him so that we, as sinners, can enter into the presence of a holy God.

[11:24] To know Christ, to know his perfectly righteous life imputed to you, his perfect obedience imputed to you, and to know his atoning and saving death in your place.

Because there is nothing about our best attempts at goodness that can save us. I trust Paul's testimony on that and the testimony of the rest of Scripture.

Only being in Christ, through faith, being united to his life, his death, and his resurrection, can save us. And to know Christ, to be in Christ, is to know his resurrection and to look with hope to the future, which is this morning's third point.

Paul goes on, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

[12:57] Amen. Looking to the future is an interesting thing, isn't it? I mean, sometimes we see exciting possibilities, but on the other hand, looking to the future can be a really scary thing.

For one, pretty much all of what is in the future is unknown to us. That's kind of a troubling thing, isn't it?

who knows what tomorrow will bring. And then, in case we weren't worried enough about that, Paul starts talking about suffering.

We don't like to hear that. He's saying it's going to happen. We'd like to forget it, but it's the truth.

And then Paul starts talking about sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

what in the world is that all about? You know, many churches today are all about health and wealth and naming it and claiming it.

[14:09] What is all of this suffering stuff? But here is the thing. We have to remember that in the Christian life, even our suffering has meaning.

God can take the suffering that we go through and he can work through that to make us more into the likeness of Christ.

We don't always know what the future holds. There's very little that we know for certain when we look to the future, but we do know this. Christ is risen.

Let's not forget that, by the way, as we prepare for Ash Wednesday this week. Here's the reality, brothers and sisters.

We are living in the overlap of the already and the not yet. Death is already defeated because Christ defeated it when he rose from the dead.

[15:18] that's not all. There is coming a day when death will be no more forever. There is coming a day when the new Jerusalem will come down, the dead will be raised, and we will be called to the marriage supper of the Lamb, and it will never end.

And even until that day, believers who are absent from the body will be present with the Lord. To know Christ is to know his resurrection and to look with hope to the future.

Why? Because Christ is risen and God keeps his promises. to bring us back full circle, I want to go back to my cynical teenage self for a minute.

There was a band that I listened to in those days, and sometimes still do, I have to admit, from time to time. But anyway, a few years ago they released an album with this title, All We Love We Leave Behind.

There was a time in my life when that title would have pretty well summarized my view of life and human existence.

[16:55] As I told Mia in the car, there was a time when I wasn't sure that I believed in anything. I did believe that pain hurt, but that was about it.

but that is not what I believe anymore because Christ rescued me and all of my hope is in him.

What I believe now is much better represented by a C.S. Lewis quote that is hanging framed in my living room. I suspect that the Apostle Paul would have also expressed his approval of this one.

This is what it says. There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind.

And in case you might be wondering if that is an expression of just blind optimism, just hoping for the best, Lewis said that in a letter to an elderly woman who was facing declining health and looking at the prospect of her own death.

[18:25] Strangely enough, he also said it shortly before his own death. He was to die just a few months later. It is not just wishful thinking.

No. It is a conviction grounded in a hope and grounded in promises from a trustworthy God that even being beaten with rods and shipwrecked three times can't diminish.

A conviction grounded in a hope and in God's promises that even death itself cannot defeat. And it's all because of the surpassing worth of Christ.

It's all because of Christ's righteousness for us Christ. And it's all because Christ is risen.

So my brothers and my sisters, this morning, I will leave us with this. We can say and say truly that there are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind.

[19:47] thank you, Lord. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.