

Sermon for Sunday, October 8, 2017

The Prize

We live in an age of profound and ever increasing distrust. From the mundane to the sublime, we are suspicious of others: anxious of being deceived, fearful of being ripped off, terrified of becoming a victim of foul play. Our cars, once left unlocked, are now protected with alarms, and ignition blockers. Our homes, once open and accessible, now have dead-bolts, security systems, and in downtown areas, bars across the windows. Even our church has an alarm system to protect us against theft and vandalism. Our computers and cell phones, despite having virus protection, spam blockers, and malware protection are subject to hackers. To board an airplane we have to partially disrobe. And I haven't even mentioned our distrust that the government can solve our problems. Our fears are well founded, of course. We have good reason to be suspicious. But the level of distrust in our society, born out of fear, is itself frightening. We have become the age of anxiety.

The normal method of coping with anxiety and fear born out of distrust, is to create laws, rules, regulations, and agreements for the governing of human behavior. This rule of law, which includes consequences for unacceptable behavior, renews our confidence and sense of security by promising us a degree of certainty. It makes us certain, that violators who are caught, will be prosecuted. It makes us certain, that wrong behavior will be punished. It makes us certain that the right will win out, and the wrong will lose out. It makes us certain that those who abide by the law are good citizens.

Now the Law of Moses served a similar function for our forebears in the faith. Not only did it provide for an ordered society, but it also promised the certainty of God's blessing upon those who abided by it. The Pharisees, of which the apostle Paul was a devout member, were the Law's greatest and most respected adherents. If anyone felt secure and certain about being in a good relationship with God, it was them, because they were blameless. But they were also terribly restricted by the certainty of the Law. They couldn't help anyone on the Sabbath, because it was against the Law. They couldn't show compassion upon "unclean" people because it was against the Law. The Law's certainty was comforting, but also restricting. It was like the bars across the windows of urban homes, which not only keep people out, but also trap people in, sometimes tragically. The cost of a security fashioned in law, is restriction in human interaction. Law copes with distrust, but it doesn't eliminate it.

Faith is different. Faith, by its very nature, eliminates distrust. It invites us to find our certainty, not in law, but in the only thing that is eternally certain, God. It invites us to find our security, not in human achievement or in human restrictions, but in God's promise of eternal love. It invites us to eliminate our fear, by placing our confidence, not in ourselves, or in other human beings, or in a justice system, but in the power of God's grace to save us. Faith is choosing to trust in God, and trust casts out fear.

Prior to his conversion, Paul, loved the Law, and was confident that he obeyed it as well, if not better than anyone. To the Philippians he writes, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 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." But when he met the risen Christ, and felt the liberating power of faith; when he got a taste of what life could be like if he trusted in God's grace instead of in his human achievements; when he understood that being united with Christ Jesus through faith could secure him the victory of eternal life, he regarded all his accomplishments as secondary. He writes, "For Christ's sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard 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 one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith (Phil. 3:8b-9)."

The extraordinary impact of this statement is that Paul is not tossing away junk to gain Christ, but that which is of utmost value to him. He's not casting away sins, frustrations, broken relationships, and bad habits, but rather his good name, his prestige, his perfection, and his beloved law for what he has found is the unsurpassed value of knowing Christ Jesus through faith. No longer does he concern himself with a path of self-

improvement for his own sake; he pursues self-improvement only to give thanks to God for the gift of Christ. No longer does he concern himself with what possessions he might lose, or with his life which he might forfeit; he is only concerned to be united with the love of his life, Jesus, the Lord. No longer is he afraid of anything, because he has given himself up to God in total trust, preserving no claims, seeking no advantage, but in service to Christ leaving his status before God entirely in God's gracious hands. He has been saved by grace through faith. He knows that whether he is concerned with God or not, God is concerned with him. He needs nothing else. God's grace is sufficient.

In an age of increasing distrust where laws are piled upon laws to cope with our ever growing fear of each other; in an age of anxiety where security is found only in limiting the freedom of human interaction; in an age of uncertainty where we are prisoners within our own homes, faith in God offers us hope, transformation, and liberation. Distrust breeds distrust, and distrust is the seed of fear. Only trust breeds trust, and trust is the seed of love. And the only genuine basis for trust, even our risking to trust one another, is trusting in God. Secure in God's love through the power of faith, a love made real to us in Jesus Christ, we can suffer to trust each other, and we can find the courage to love. It's our world's only hope. Though they have their place in this world of sin, protests won't do it, gun locks won't do it, airport security won't do it, virus protection won't do it, police won't do it, and even law-abiding citizens won't do it. Only love will do it, empowered by faith in Jesus Christ, and that has been the church's proclamation and ministry for over two thousand years.

Finally, Paul reminds us that faith is not static, but dynamic. The better word is "faithing." The life of faith is one of growing into Christ, of moving into God's kingdom, of trusting Jesus. Lest any miss the point, Paul portrays himself in the most demanding posture he knows: as a runner in a race. His language is vivid, tense, and repetitious: pressing, stretching, pushing, straining. In those words we can feel how the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache, the heart pumps, and the perspiration rolls. "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." The life of faith is not so much one of contentment, even though there is a peace that surpasses understanding in its liberating assurances, but rather a life of focused activity. That activity is trusting and loving, God and one another. It's arduous activity demanding great discipline. It strains the body and the spirit. But it is saving activity, redemptive activity, and reconciling activity.

The end of this marathon of faith, is the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Is that prize our resurrection to eternal life? Yes, but it's more than that. Is that prize our perfection in faith, our complete trusting in God? Yes, but it's more than that. Is that prize to be enjoyed in the life that is to come? Yes, but it is also enjoyed in the life we are now living. The prize is best understood, as our complete and perfect communion with God and with each other in Jesus Christ. That is the prize which faith strains to gain, the goal toward which faith runs. It is the end, the eternal end, of complete trust in God, an end which Jesus, through the power of his faith, attained, and which in him, and through his suffering, we also may attain.

Today, we begin our annual appeal for the financial support we need to continue to proclaim this good news, and run the marathon of faith. Next November we will celebrate that we have been doing this at Ladue Chapel for seventy-five years, and remember with gratitude all the saints who have enabled us to continue to strive toward the prize of faith's journey: namely the day, the blessed and most glorious day, when every knee shall bend and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God; the day, when we are united in one faith, one Lord, one baptism; the day when crying, mourning and pain are no more, and fear is swallowed up in love and trust. Let us then, as people of faith, do this one thing: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, let us press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us trust in God. It will change the world.

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Philippians 3:4b-14