

“Lost Gains”

Exodus 20:1-17; Philippians 3:4b-14

World Communion Sunday, October 5, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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What a day in worship! Local church history and an historic moment commemorating the Myrtle Beach Church Bell; reading the Big Ten (Commandments) and a celebration of the Sacrament on a day designed to remind us that, for most Christians around the world, every Sunday is World Communion Sunday. So where does the preacher go with the message?

John C. Holbert of the (United Methodist) Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas offers a far more insightful word than I could on the Ten Commandments. His blog from this past Monday entitled “A Very High Bar Indeed” at www.patheos.com is well worth the 3 minutes it will take you to read it. In short: just because we don’t keep the Commandments doesn’t mean we should ignore them. In fact, the high bar to which they call us is exactly why we should read, inwardly digest and seek to obey them. Years ago the annual book The Minister’s Manual told the story of the worshipper who challenged the pastor of one particular church where the Commandments were read every time the Holy Communion was served. Replied the pastor with a twinkle in their eye, “Ah, but we do something even more radical!” “What?!?” replied the scandalized worshipper. “We try to keep them.”

While the linkage has its merits, it has its limitations, too. One is the implication that we have to be worthy to receive the Sacrament. I’ve said before that I will always remember **my** pastor who offered this invitation to Communion: “*Do not wait until you are worthy to come to the table. For if we wait until we were worthy, few of us would ever come at all.*” Jesus proclaimed, and Paul taught, that a faith rooted only in religious law inevitably led, not to righteous, but to self-righteousness. Simply: “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” “All” means “all.”

Who knew better than Paul? Paul was a layman's layman. If anybody had a claim to being righteous by following the rules, it was Paul. He says that very thing in today's reading from Philippians: *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. (Phil.3:5-6)*

Doesn't mean much? Here's a close equivalent: *"I was baptized in this church. A Methodist all my life. Both my parents were Methodists. Active? You bet! I haven't met a church committee I didn't like. And spiritual growth? Yes: Sunday School, MYF, adult Bible study, retreats. Some have called me 'a pillar of the church.' I don't know about that, but I do know I wish other people would be more active, step up more."*

So Paul has this religious pedigree that is flawless. Flawless. Then he says this startling thing: *Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (3:7-8)*

Whatever gains I had...I have come to regard as loss. Lost gains. Surely we know about lost gains. If we have retirement or other investments in the stock market, we've seen a 120% increase in the last five years. The only problem is that 100% of that is recovery of lost gains that occurred in the crash of late 2008.

Lost gains. We conducted a celebration of life for Michael Groves on Friday. As Michael would tell you he was not a perfect person. Maureen loves to tell the story, and gave me permission to tell it to you, of the time in a restaurant where she and Michael were bickering and an adjacent diner said "You two must hate each other" and they both replied "We do." "Then why do you stay married?" and Maureen's quick retort "Spite." A 64 year "spite" that was truly the deepest kind of love, through thick and thin, in all their humanity. And to us who knew Michael also, a lost gain.

Or health. Or well-being of body, mind or spirit. Or broken relationships. We all know of lost gains.

Paul does not speak glibly when he says “*For Christ’s sake I have suffered the loss of all things and regard them as **rubbish.***” (3:8) Ah, those translators: always sensitive to cultural taboos. The Greek word is *skubala*, a word we do not use in polite company. The closest “polite company” word we could use is “dung.”

Am I trying to scandalize you? Absolutely not. But Paul was. He’s trying to explain to faithful Christians why pedigrees don’t work; why to be Christian you sometimes have to get dirty; why it isn’t okay just to show up on Sunday as important as Sunday is; why Christianity is a vocation, a calling, whether we are clergy or lay. He’s trying to convey what it is about this Jesus that has him writing this letter from **jail**, for heaven’s sake.

And what it was for Paul, and what it is for me, and what it was for Michael, and what I know it is for many of you, is that Christ gets a hold of us and makes us his own. Like a mother cat picking up kittens by the scruff of the neck, Christ gets a hold of us and everything is different. It’s called conversion and it doesn’t matter if it’s evolutionary or revolutionary – occurring over many years or in the flash of an instant – it changes us and nothing is ever the same again.

And we get on fire for Jesus. And if we think that is too much rhetoric, a bit “over the top, pastor,” then may I observe that our world is already burning for far less holy purposes and we could do far worse than be on fire with passion for the Lord Jesus Christ. And if we think **that** is too forceful or extreme, then I would have to ask “What are we doing being Methodist?” For our founder, the Rev. John Wesley, when asked why crowds by the thousands came to hear him preach in the open air in 18th century England replied, “*Because I catch on fire, and people come to watch me burn!*”

None of us is perfect. The Ten Commandments alone make that clear. But all of us, by the grace of God, are saved if we, like Paul, press on to make the faith of Christ our own. We are saved by knowing the power of the resurrected Christ. And once saved, that love of Christ reaches from our outstretched arms – as Christ himself reached outstretched arms on the cross to save us – to our neighbors near and far. Everything else – the cars, the clothes, the homes, the 401k's, the degrees – are gains that are worth losing if they prevent us from making room in our hearts for the King of Love to live. All those lost gains free us for the call of God in Christ Jesus: a call to love, concretely and measurably, today and every day. Amen.