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Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Philippians 3



This morning's Epistle puts me in mind of a conversation I had recently with a young man who was the son of an Episcopal priest. We were talking about what it was like growing up in the church, hearing your own dad preach, play every single role in the annual Christmas pageant, and the rest. I was asking these questions wondering about what it might be like for Addie. Well, John grew up in a home where faith was front and center; his family prayed before meals together, and his experiences of church were mostly positive. He was confirmed, and participated in high school ministries. But then he got to college and he started reading and taking seriously science and questions of evolution, and he decided there was no way that the god of his childhood existed. It wasn't an instant thing, the loss of his faith. It happened over the course of a year or so. John graduated, and he went on to earn a Ph.D. in neuroscience from an elite university and his study of the brain confirmed his view that we are all basically a random mix of molecular interactions, complicated chemical compounds.

But something happened that is making John doubt these certainties. John's dad had recently died and he was grieving. He reached out to me as the priest of the closest church to him; he felt like church, its language and liturgy, was the one place he could feel his dad. He said, "I'm beginning to wonder if the language of faith is the best language for the living and the dead to speak to one another."

Philippians 3 seems to be as good a passage as any to find hope for my friend looking to reach out and touch his father through faith. This passage is Paul at his most personal and warm. Paul writes from prison and he is baring his heart before the church community in Philippi. Paul says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

I find this verse to be so amazing. It's so grand in scope, so full of longing, and yet so refreshingly human. This is Paul. The guy that wrote the majority of the New Testament. Paul the most important Christian theologian, the one without

whom there would be no global Christianity. Paul, the one whose life was upended by a revelation from heaven while on the road to Damascus. And he's saying, "I want to know Christ." Not, "I know all about Jesus, and all about God." No! "I want to know Christ." Feel the tentativeness of that phrase. "I want to know Christ." In other words, I don't yet quite know for sure.

Last week I mentioned the familiar paradigm of faith testimonies that you'll hear if you hang out in evangelical circles. Someone is a terrible person, confused and sinful, with no faith in their life; they meet Jesus by faith; and now they have a bright and clear vision of what to do with their life, likely converting other people to experience what they did. Notice how different it is for Paul. Paul was quite a good person before he met Jesus. He is happy to tell us about it.

For those who are interested, "I am a Hebrew of Hebrews (a full blooded Jew); circumcised on the 8th day (we did it right!); from the tribe of Benjamin (not one of those lesser tribes); a Pharisee (from a good Rabbinic school); in terms of the law, blameless (blameless!). Paul doesn't have faith in God, he has faith in Paul. A certain and proud faith. And God seems to fit into this scheme. And then he met Jesus, or was met by Jesus. And all that self-certainty was blown to pieces; its as good as "rubbish" he says. Know thyself, says the ancient dictum. And Paul, says, "I've done that. Now, I want to know Christ."

We often think about faith as knowing things about Christ. His history, his biography; what he really said, what he might not have; we read books about Christ, apocryphal imaginings of his childhood or his secret marriage; we've got books about his politics, about his social agenda. Paul isn't satisfied with about Christ. In other branches of the church, churches that claim to be on something of a first name basis with Jesus, who pronounce "Jesus" with a few extra e's, Jesus is turned into a golden ticket the faithful possess that purchases them a guilt-free conscience or eternal life. Jesus becomes about heaven. Thus, one doesn't have to feel the troubles and travails of life, because thanks to Jesus

they have the afterlife. Christ is the guarantor of success, prosperity, and security. About something else. That's not what Paul is talking about.

So what is he talking about? He says three things.

First, he says, "I want to know the power of Christ's resurrection." If Christ is not raised from the dead the Christian story is a tale of doomed love, and it's a pathetic picture of power. If Christ isn't raised from the dead, we are fools and most to be pitied, said Paul to another church. By this he means that we've totally missed the understanding of power. If Christ isn't raised from the dead, and the world's power is all there is, then there is only tragedy; death means nothing more than you didn't have the power to survive. It's the story of people in charge telling those not in charge that they don't have as much of a right to exist as they do. But if Christ is raised from the dead, the power holding the cosmos together is entirely different. If Christ is raised from the dead, then God's love is the final word. And hope is our posture towards tomorrow. For all our shame, fear, and all the wasted years will be scooped up and held in the love that is God. This is the power that turns even death to its creative purpose of life. When Paul says, "I want to know Christ," he is saying he wants to grow in this different understanding of power.

Then second Paul says, "I want to share in Christ's sufferings by becoming like him in his death." Here Paul is saying, "I don't just want Christ when the sun is out; I want to know him in the rain, in the storms, when my world is falling apart." Paul doesn't want resurrection on the cheap. He wants his life to look like Jesus's life. He doesn't want a sunny-side up faith. He wants something real, and tried, something forged in the crucible of life's hardship. He wants to enter into Christ's passion – his passion for the Father and his passion for the poor and the oppressed. He wants to live for others to the point that as a self, as an individual and atomized self, he dies. This isn't cheap faith; this is the gritty faith learned in the classroom of suffering.

Third, Paul says, "if somehow I may attain the resurrection

from the dead.” Did you catch that word – somehow? This is the most tentative line of the sentence; the least self-assured. If somehow. It’s as if Paul wants to know the power of resurrection, and to be made like him in his sufferings, even with no guarantee of resurrection. Somehow. Jesus isn’t some means to another end. He is the end. I want to know Christ, not for what I get from him. There is no higher gift than presence. And even if I don’t get resurrection, it will have still been worth it.

There is a great prayer that I keep on my desk, offered by an 8th century Muslim. The prayer has a way of making Paul’s point in rather stark, honest language. It goes: if I want thee for fear of hell, give me hell. If I want thee for the gain of heaven, deny me heaven. If I want thee for thyself alone, give me thyself alone. This is a courageous faith, a bold faith: even if I don’t get all the rewards and honor and heavenly accolades, even if my plans don’t all work out, I still want Christ.

The power of resurrection; to be made like him in his sufferings; that somehow I might attain the resurrection from the dead. Do I want to know the power of Christ’s resurrection? Not do I feel it. Not do I know it for sure. Do I want to know it? Made like him in his sufferings....the question is not whether you will suffer or not, if you will know pain or not. Each of us will. Will we let our suffering instruct us? Will we inquire into it, look for God in it? Can we make even suffering a place where Jesus is seen in us? The question is not a simple do you believe in the resurrection? I think the question is more tentative than that – do you want to believe in the resurrection? Do you want it to be true?

Theresa of Avila said, in a moment of steely honesty you might not expect from a saint, “Lord, I don’t believe in you. I don’t want to believe in you. But I do want to want to believe.” Perhaps that want is the place of faith. Perhaps that want is that little crack, that opening, that place where God’s presence meets us. Perhaps wanting to know Christ is to know him. Doubting is so much closer to faith than

certainty is.

Besides, I think if Paul were here he'd suggest to us that we place too much emphasis on our faith – the point of our faith is not our faith. Notice, Paul spends the first part of Chapter 3 talking about his faith, that faith that frankly was all about him; and then something shifts, and the chapter becomes about Christ, about God. Paul redirects our focus from our faith to the faithfulness of God. The goal is the God who draws our tentative, diffident faith into the story of healing love. Faith is about touching our desire. Our wants. There is room for all here. I'd tell my friend, and I'll tell you, to want to want to believe is enough.

