

Fifth Sunday in Lent April 7 2019

Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Gain or loss?

A simple enough question. But how we answer it can be an important indicator of where we are in our faith walk.

The apostle Paul is writing to the church in Philippi while he is imprisoned in Rome. Held captive because of his belief in Jesus Christ as Lord. A belief he will eventually be killed for.

Paul points out how he had it all made. He was a respected Jewish religious figure. He was, according to all the Jewish beliefs and practices of the time, in right relationship with God. Following all the commandments to be faithful. He also had success in the secular world as one who was a Roman citizen, given certain rights and privileges that were not accorded to others. There was nothing more he could ask for. He considered all these to be gain. The word used here is a term from the business world. It meant trading up, exchanging one mediocre thing for something better. A better deal.

And yet, after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul has come to see all of these things as “rubbish”. Good for nothing but to be thrown away. Traded for something better. These things that he once regarded as gain, the best deal in life, he now saw as loss- a bad deal which resulted in a penalty.

As one author puts it, in this letter, “Paul is affirming a new reality where followers of the Lord Jesus Christ accept a new and radical value system where

background and heritage, education and training, religious and political convictions and activism, and lifestyle matter not one jot compared to the value of knowing Christ as Lord.”

Paul has experienced firsthand the repentance, the changing of the mind that is talked about so much in the Gospel of Luke. A change in the way he sees things that leads to a change in how he lives.

Gain or loss?

You often hear stories of people who have this same kind of re-evaluation of their viewpoint when some tragedy strikes; cancer or another serious illness. A major life change- divorce, birth of a child. The death of a loved one. And suddenly, all the things that seemed so important. Were so important, were the better deal, gain to the world they lived in, now were revealed to be “rubbish”, a bad deal that was worthless in the end.

Wealth, the perfect job, power, the best car, or latest electronics. Being recognized in public. Playing on all the right sports teams, going to the right schools, being in the most extracurricular activities. Suddenly all the time and energy spent on these things seems...wasted.

In these moments, we pierce the veil of deception that we place before our eyes and see things as they really are. In these moments, especially those of deep despair and sorrow, we encounter the cross of Jesus Christ. It shows us just how out of control we are, how all that we thought was gain is loss. It leaves us broken... at the foot of the cross with nowhere else to turn than to the one who hangs on that cross.

Paul has had that experience on the road to Damascus, and now he lives as what Luther calls a Theologian of the Cross. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. And Paul does this in his letter to the Philippians when he calls his former hope as a righteous Jew and a faithful citizen of the Roman Emperor loss. A change in understanding that cost him status, prestige and eventually, his life. But, a change he regards as gain.

Gain or loss?

We stand, like Jesus and those at table with him, only a short time from the cross. A week from Palm Sunday and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Eleven days from Maundy Thursday, the last supper with the disciples. Twelve from Good Friday and the death of Jesus.

We have journeyed through three quarters of these 40 days of Lent. What have we learned in this renewed encounter with Jesus? How have we been transformed? What do we value, consider gain in our lives? What do we consider loss- a bad deal, a penalty? Do we see these things truly, or are we just deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us? Of what do we still need to repent?

Six days before the Passover. Six days before his betrayal. Six days before death. And Jesus sits at the table. Others are at the table, a celebration given by Lazarus and his sisters. Along with others, we know that Mary- sister to Lazarus, and Judas-disciple of Jesus are there. Each illustrates this tension between what is gain and loss.

Mary experiences in her anointing of Jesus with the Nard gain. It is an intimate expression of love. Perhaps an expression of grief...of anticipation of what awaits

Jesus a week later. A response to the actions of Jesus for her brother (Lazarus- raised from the stink of death) who even now eats with Jesus. The Nard is an extravagant gift. Worth over a year's wage for a daily worker. Now gone...laved on the feet of her Lord, soaked into her hair. The fragrance filling the room. Earthy and rich. Gone, but gain. Trading up. A better deal.

Gain for Mary. Gain of the joy of thanking and honoring the one who gave her brother life. Gain, for a woman who echoes the action Jesus will take with the disciples on Maundy Thursday when he washes their feet. Gain for the intimate connection with her Rabbi. Mary is the one who (according to Luke) sat at Jesus' feet, learning as a disciple when last he came to her house. She is one whose mind had been transformed. Who saw the extravagant gift that was Christ and to return that in honor was a better deal than anything else she had been offered.

Then there was Judas, the one who would betray Jesus. Who was also a disciple. Who had journeyed with Jesus during his ministry. Been part of the inner circle. Who was also at the table with Jesus. But who saw in this moment...only loss. "What a waste! This nard could have been sold and the money given to the poor!" Nice words to cover the selfish nature of the request. It was loss of personal gain. Even assuming he was honest, it was loss because it was wasted. Because the value you could have gotten from it went to such an extravagant gesture. Because measured against what he assumed was present in Christ it was too much. It was sacrifice.

What do we see in this moment? Gain or loss? Are we Mary at the feet of Christ? Or are we Judas, at the table but not really seeing Jesus for who he was. Seeing more value in expensive perfume than in the Messiah? The one who will save us.

As we are present here together on this Sunday morning. Assembled around Word and Sacrament. Do we count this time together as gain or loss? Is it the best deal we could have to, as Martin Luther put it in his explanation of the third commandment, “not despise preaching or God’s word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.” Or is this time loss, a bad deal?

Is it gain to share from our ,sometimes meager, resources to help others eat? To help them recover from flood, or hurricane, or fire? Or is that loss, a waste of resources? Ones that could be better spent on feeding me and my family. Of being invested for our future?

Is it gain to spend the extra time in prayer, in reading scripture? Or is it loss?

With what eyes do we see our relationship with Jesus? With the eyes of Mary, knowing that anything we offer is a pittance against what Christ has given us? Ready to sit at his feet and learn. Learn how to love God and love others.

Or with the eyes of Judas, only seeing how this can help us? Focused on the ways of the world to which we are so in bondage?

Gain or loss?

But perhaps it’s not so much about choice, but about diagnosis? If, as Martin Luther often reflects, our lot in life is best described as having the sickness of sin. Might this question be more of a diagnostic tool? One that helps us determine how much medicine we need?

If we see gain in Christ as Mary does. Gain that trumps everything else. We have probably already partaken of the medicine that is the Gospel, that is the Grace of God. More is needed, to be sure, but we know it is working.

If we see loss in Christ, in our following of him and his way of life, then we might more clearly see how sick we are. How in need of Christ we are and the grace we receive through him.

This too, has value. For it is only when we see clearly, with the eyes of a theologian of the cross, calling a thing what it is, that we can understand what the cure is. Jesus, and him crucified.

We cannot know the fullness of God in Christ. We will still confuse gain and loss. Will still succumb to the sickness of sin, selfishness, turned in on ourselves. We will still turn our backs on God and the life fuller and more abundant that God offers.

But, perhaps like Mary, as we complete our journey this Lent. In the walk through Holy Week, we might see the way God creates for us through the desert. Will actually perceive the new thing that is about to spring forth at the resurrection of our Lord. That we might see, in Jesus dead on the cross...the death of our own self-delusion. Our own willfulness. Our own illusion of control. And that we might feel a stirring of something new. A new growth that will spring up as surely as the flowers. A resurrection that comes when we see the empty tomb.

