

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death...(Philippians 3:10, NRS)

All of humanity, I bet, must from time to time confront the question, “Does it really make sense for me to be so good, and to lose so much for the sake of the good?” We read in the holy Gospel that it would profit us nothing to gain the whole world, but lose our soul (Mt. 16:26), and most certainly, that is true. Yet we live in a trying, vexing, and tempting city, and sometimes we might sigh and say to ourselves quietly, “I wish I were king! That would be sweet. I wish other folks would serve me instead of me always serving others. I wish...I wish Central Park were mine. I wish I didn’t have to pay taxes. I wish I didn’t have to earn my living by the sweat of my brow, but would simply get a paycheck without doing any work.”

Well, such fanciful wishes might not lure us, but there are others that might strike closer to home. Let’s say, you are a nurse, and your shift has already been long and exhausting. One of the patients is dying. He is not your patient, but someone else’s. Yet you know how it is in your unit. When someone is dying, one nurse is not enough. Others have to lend their strength too, on top of their other duties. And so you do it, tired though you are. And all the nurses in the unit do it too, without regard to their religious faith or lack of it. Yet *for you*, in serving your neighbor so, you know that you are doing what Christ asks of you, and what you are built for ever since you were baptized. You are called to take up your cross and follow Christ. This is the way of reality for you. To use the words of St. Paul in this morning’s text,

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death...(Philippians 3:10, NRS)

For you, this is not insane, but the most real thing you can do and the most true way of life.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the wicked farmers in our Gospel story and St. Paul in his testimony to the Philippians. Someone has gone mad here. Some poor soul has drifted into madness. Is it Paul or is it the farmers? Some folk might vote for Paul as being the insane one, since he speaks of desiring suffering and death. But I vote for the farmers, since the heart of madness is the refusal to see reality, and so they refuse. They are as mad as hatters¹.

Before looking at Paul and tenant farmers separately, let’s note the one important area in which they are united. There is something they share: it is the consciousness that they are stewards, both of them. They are not the king, but subjects of the king. They are

¹ Mercury used to be used in the making of hats. This was known to have affected the nervous systems of hatters, causing them to tremble and appear insane. See <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/mad-as-a-hatter.html>

not the landowner, but tenants. St. Paul once put into words his consciousness that we are but stewards, entrusted with good things that ultimately belong to God, not us:

¹⁹...You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.(1 Corinthians 6:19-20, RSV)

As for the wicked farmers in this morning's Gospel story, I don't know what they are thinking. They know that they are *tenant* farmers. They know that there is an owner of the vineyard, and that they are not the man. They know that someone planted the vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower, and they know that they are not the man. Surely, they would have remembered doing those things if they had done them. They would have remembered digging the ground, constructing a fence and a watchtower, for that all is wearying work. But they do not remember such work because they did not do it, nor see to it being done. The owner of the vineyard accomplished those things, not them. Yet they act as if they are the owner and as if they had made the various investments in the enterprise.

Perhaps they suffer from mercury poisoning. They tremble, they shake, they hallucinate. When the owner sends his representatives to collect his portion of the harvest, they abuse them, violently. They seize, they kill, they stone the legal representatives. Do they imagine the police will not come? Do they imagine that there are no prisons in the land? And most demented of all, they imagine that they can kill the son of the owner and thereby gain his inheritance! These farmers have forsaken reality. Their willingness to live in a dream world and their refusal to face the truth is causing misery, both for the owner of the vineyard and for themselves in the end. So, I vote for them. I think they are the mad ones.

Now what about St. Paul? It is a strange saying, his testimony to the Philippians:

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death...

But no, I do not think Paul is drifting into madness here. Rather, I think that Paul is striving to be the sanest of us all.

For one thing, his touch with reality is very firm. Some people, when they at last come to faith, speaking badly of their past, and in so doing, they lose their feel for the fact that there was much that was good in their past. Not so St. Paul. He was blessed with many gifts, and he knows it. He was born an Israelite. He was privileged to know the stories of the Bible from his mother's knee. He grew up as a solid member of the covenant people, and he never loses his conviction that the Jews are indeed the covenant people of God. He was entrusted with learning and authority. He was blessed, and his Christian faith is not of the kind that causes him to deny the blessings of his past.

But above all, he shows his rationality in his desire to be conformed to Christ. He is trying to following the pattern of Jesus—a pattern he has already described for us and commended to us:

⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in

the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.(Philippians 2:5-8, RSV)

For Paul, though his past might have been heaven itself, with all its privileges as a Pharisee and so forth, the man is willing to leave such a heaven for the greater advantage of knowing Christ and being conformed to him.

Let me close by speaking of Paul and us. My suspicion is that St. Paul's desire to be conformed to Christ, even if it should mean conforming himself to Christ's suffering and death, is rational not only for him, but also for you and me in our town, in New York City in the year of our Lord 2008, as well as in every year.

We might say that Paul is different from us and that we should not be held up to his standard. And sure enough, we can point to important differences between Paul and us. For one thing, he was a saint, but that has yet to be proved us. Maybe we will end up that way someday, but meanwhile, for the most part, we are simply trying to get by, trying to keep body and soul attached to one another, and to stay afloat in a perplexing financial and vocational world. So, Paul was a saint, but we are not.

And second, Paul was grabbed hold of by Christ in an unforgettable way, but we probably were not. I say "probably," because there are mysteries of holiness in the lives of people to this day. Why, I know a young man who languished in the country jail for many months, when suddenly Christ grabbed hold of the man, and I do believe he is a changed man now and will always be so. But for many of us, we came to Christ in a much more mild way that Paul did. I mean, Paul was blinded by the glory of Christ, knocked from his horse, and addressed with great authority by Christ. No wonder he was able to say, "I am not my own. I have been bought with a price."

But it seems to me that the adventure of our Christian life in this modern world is to follow Paul as he follows Christ into the strange, divine rationality of serving others. We might not be saints, yet, but we are Christians, with the Holy Spirit of Christ in us desiring to lead us into an extraordinary life.

And we are like Paul in this too: We know that we are but stewards of our lives. We are not the landowners, but the tenant farmers. We are not the king, but subjects of the King. And we are not the lord, but followers of the Lord who would lead us, even when the day is done, the shift is near complete, and we are very tired... who leads us into love and service for a world very much in need of this strange kind of rationality.

For this is always the way: those who follow Christ, though they should empty themselves in love for the world, are the most rational of us all, for they cleave to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.