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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The 19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 8, 2023
Philippians 3:4b-14
The Way of the Cross

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

I have chosen hymns about the Cross for this liturgy, because I mean now to preach about the way of the Cross. St. Paul walked in the way of the Cross and wants you and me to do the same. So does Jesus. They want us to surrender some of our strength and privileges and plunge down into the ways of love.

Last Sunday I preached on Philippians 2 — especially on St. Paul's teaching that we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling but to know that God is at work in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure. It is a passage that means much to me. It gives great dignity to our daily labors, teaching us that each of us can be useful to God in building the New Jerusalem. Now, I want to continue preaching on Philippians. The lectionary moves on to Philippians 3, and so I want to move on to that chapter too. Especially I am drawn to this passage in that chapter:

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings *by becoming like him in his death*, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11, NRSV)

In this passage, St. Paul speaks of his desire to imitate Christ. And he does not simply mean imitate Christ in our Lord's patience and lovingkindness, but also in his death and his surrendering of so much:

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

It is a stark saying, but one that goes to the heart of St. Paul's daily Christian life. The apostle wants the Philippians to follow him in the way of the Cross. Paul is in heaven now. He can see you and me and cheer us on. He wants not just the Philippians, but also you and me to follow him in Christ's manner of life. He wants us to follow him in the way of the Cross.

That is how we keep our churches together. And that is how we become useful to the city around us. *Jesus* bids his disciples to take up their cross and follow him (Luke 9:23). *St. Paul* wants us to do the same. The great thing

about St. Paul's letter to the Philippians is that it gives us some insight to what it *means* to take up our cross and follow Jesus. The letter gives us a living example: I mean, St. Paul. God willing, it will not come our way to be crucified. God willing, we will not have to take up a heavy cross as Jesus did on his way to Golgotha. And yet, St. Paul believes that every one of us needs to follow the way of the Cross. It is not a natural way for us. It requires discipline and virtue. But we can do it. We can make progress in the way of the Cross as we go on in life.

In St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he laid down the great principle governing his life. He said this:

¹When I came to you, brethren [he means sisters too], I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2, RSV)

Paul is a born theologian, and often he speaks using grand abstract principles. This saying to the Corinthians is one of them:

²For I decided to know nothing among you *except Jesus Christ and him crucified*. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2, RSV)

To my mind, the great thing about our recent readings from Philippians is that they let us see the man behind the principle. In Philippians, St. Paul becomes personal. He rather pours out his heart. In particular let me lift up a parallel between Philippians Chapter 2 and today's reading from Philippians Chapter 3.¹

In Chapter 2 we have St. Paul's famous preaching about the self-emptying of Jesus. As I read it aloud, please note a kind of rugged valley in Paul's description of Jesus. He speaks of a descent, but also, in the end of an ascent. The passage goes this way:

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. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him

¹ Richard B. Hayes notes this parallel in his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation — A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic* (p. 32). HarperCollins, 1996. Kindle Edition.

and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11, RSV)

Now, in Chapter 3, we learn that when St. Paul urges the Philippians to have a certain mind among them — the mind we find in Jesus Christ — he himself has lived that way. The man was brilliant. He had studied at the feet of the famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). If he had continued on his original path, perhaps he could have inherited the seat of Gamaliel on the Sanhedrin — the Supreme Court of Israel. But he surrendered all his advantages in order to become a traveling preacher, often persecuted, beaten, and despised by Israel. The words of our Chapter 3 rather fly on by, but this time I find myself moved to think of the actual human life behind them. Paul is saying that he has emptied himself of power and privilege, following the example of Jesus. He gave up many of his advantages in life so that he could help other people. He wanted to share the good news of Jesus with them. So, as I read aloud the passage, again try to note a rugged valley in Paul's description of his life in Christ. He starts off speaking of his advantages, then he speaks of surrendering them. But also he speaks of his hope that he too will ascend someday — indeed, all the way to heaven. Here, then, is our passage:

⁴If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised 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; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him... (Philippians 3:4-9, RSV)

Then he finishes his testimony with his hope of heaven:

¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own [he means his likeness to Jesus and our Lord's way of the Cross]; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on

toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:13-14, RSV)

This is the conviction that makes sense of St. Paul's life and his epistles. He wants himself and all Christians to imitate Jesus. He wants us to empty ourselves for the sake of others, in confidence that we will enjoy the resurrection someday.

I have four things I want to say about St. Paul's emphasis on the cross. Each of these four could be a sermon in its own right. Here I mean simply to lift them up and to speak of them briefly: (1) The surrender of our strength and our advantages for the sake of others is how we make ourselves useful to our congregation and to our city. (2) St. Paul is right about Jesus: Jesus surrendered a safe and happy life in heaven in order to come to our earth and pour out his strength helping others. (3) Many good people in the world recognize that the way of the Cross is a good way of life — they know this deep in their hearts whether or not they are Christians. And (4) This way of life has its own joy.

So, let us work our way, rather quickly, through these four points. I begin with the idea that the way of Cross makes us useful to our congregation and to our city. How is anything good going to be done if we keep our strength and our advantages to ourselves? If we are hoarders of our money and our time, our listening and our compassion... if we keep all these things to ourselves, then we might in some sense flourish, and yet we will be leaving undone good things we could have accomplished on earth. Our Offertory Prayer is a fine one. It speaks of what we are willing to give up, that the Lord might do some good things through us:

- Ⓐ Merciful Father,
- Ⓒ we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us – our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Those are some mighty fine things to give up: our selves, our time, and our possessions. We head down into the rugged valley. We plunge into the ways of love. That is how we make ourselves useful to our congregation and to our city.

Second, Jesus did this. He was safe and sound up there in heaven. The angels, cherubim, and seraphim adored him. All the gold, all the silver, all the cattle on a thousand hills belonged to him. But he surrendered it all, was born of the Virgin Mary, lived the life of a poor man, and died on a cross. He gave up a lot because to him, the cause was great: he loved you, and he did not want to lose you. He did not want to lose a single one of us.

Third, many good people in this world follow the pattern of Jesus, even if they do not yet know him. They follow the way of the Cross because our Maker has placed it in their heart to do so. Life seems right to them when they pour themselves out for others. Life seems most to be on track then, when they serve others.

And fourth, the way of the Cross has its own joys. You have already heard the testimony of St. Paul. He has given up a lot. He has surrendered a lot. But what he has lost is of small value to him compared to what he has gained in trying to be true to Jesus. And so we read how he measures things:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:8, NRSV)

When he speaks of the fruits of the Spirit, let us not miss that he includes joy in his list:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, *joy*, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control... (Galatians 5:22, RSV)

St. Peter is like St. Paul: they both walked with Jesus and died the death of martyrs. And yet they both knew something of the joy of the walk. And so we have the wonderful words of St. Peter to the Christians of ancient Turkey:

Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: (1 Peter 1:8, KJV)

Summing it all up, I think that we can conclude that pouring out our strength and advantages for other folks is a good way of life. It is good for our neighbors and it is good for us. Indeed, it is a path that leads to heaven, through the grace and merits of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.