"I want to know Christ"
First Reading - Isaiah 43:16-21
Second Reading - Philippians 3:4b-14

Zach will love this. One year, way back in the 20th Century, or what my son would refer to as the Bronze Age, I accepted the call to be the Senior Pastor of a congregation up in the North Carolina foothills. As it happens, at that time the congregation was also engaged in a search for a new Director of Music, and so, in the weeks before I began serving the church, I was traveling over to meetings with the Music Search Committee and participating in their interviews with potential candidates. Zach wasn't able to apply because he was 3-years old, and the interviews conflicted with his nap schedule.

The finalists were all impressively accomplished and intrigued by the church's admirable Aeolian/Skinner organ. For each interview, we began with a dialogue focused on the standard list of interview questions covering experience, choral philosophy, accomplishments … their voting record on Hymn Madness *(not really)*. This was followed by an opportunity to spend a few minutes directing the choir in rehearsal, and I remember one of the candidates having a flair for the … dramatic. He stopped the anthem halfway through, and with great drama, had each section repeatedly sing a

single note, suggesting tweaks each time. Then he had the whole choir sing that same note again, and with a bow and a wave of the arm, said something like — *"A choir seldom takes the time and makes the effort to know how good they can actually sound. That was beautiful, and a choir can carry that pure sound through every note … a great choir can … my choir can."* Cue the eye roll. You know how I told you that periodically Donna has to tell me in social situations to "fix my face"? Well, this would be one of those times.

So, he struts triumphantly out of the choir room, handkerchief wiping the sweat of toil from his brow. And I take the opportunity to reintroduce myself. *I'll be coming soon to serve as senior pastor here, so I wanted to see if you have any questions or need any information from me?* And with a big sigh and hand to brow, he said — *"What I really need is for someone to bring me a glass of cool water."*

I don't know where the guy wound up … I think his name was Greg … but in that moment, the words of the late Stuart Scott of ESPN came to mind, though I restrained myself from saying it — *You ain't gotta go home, but you gotta get on up outta here.* Instead, I just pointed to the water fountain across the hall.

Each of the candidates had an imposing resume packed with words and notations far above my music pay grade that I did not comprehend, along with the name of the pedagogical legends under whom they studied, again, sailing past my comprehension — *Studied under Sergei Rachtupelov* — the kind of name that make you go, *Oooooh!* Following that example, my resume would probably include — *Studied under Mrs. Willard, 2nd grade teacher.* I couldn't blame them. Everyone is out there shooting our best shot in this ol' competitive world trying to spice up the resume as much as we can, wanting to let the interviewer know they are talking to … **somebody!** You are staring at the keyboard, dismayed by the remaining blank space under accomplishments, and you're debating how far back you can go — *Silver medal, 100 yd. Dash, 4th Grade Field Day*. Is that too much?

You want to establish your identity in their minds, convey your gravitas, the respect you've gained in other settings so that they will take you seriously as one whose voice carries authority or substance. And sometimes we overdo it, not only in the interview but also before any fresh acquaintance. The insecure spirit within you is pushing you to drop names, list adventures, accomplishments, and accolades so that whoever is in front of you sees you as worthy of their limited bandwidth of attention. Those

who already know you give you that roll of eyes look and sigh that say — *Oh my Lord, check your ego. We've heard this a thousand times before.*

I'd imagine that Paul's friends and fellow travelers felt that way occasionally, because with Paul, while you would encounter these eloquent calls to humility, and these stunning confessions of his own frailties and flaws, there would be other times, perhaps when he was annoyed at his critics, defending his ministry, or seeking to establish his bona fides before a new audience, Paul could sound a bit the braggart.

What riles Paul in this moment is the continuing controversy over whether new converts (specifically Gentiles) to Christ must first become Jewish (or be circumcised) before being baptized. Some traditionalists were convinced that they must. In addition, there were Gentile converts who had undergone circumcision and were of the mind that if they had to do it, the new guys should endure the pain, too.

Paul was the leading voice in the mission to the Gentiles and the primary advocate for a policy where Gentiles would not have to adhere to the laws of Judaism and be circumcised. They were being baptized into Christ and not unto the Law of Moses. The Gentiles were received by the

grace of Jesus Christ and not according to a rigorous litmus test of ancient traditions. So, in our text today Paul is assertively making this point. To silence the critics claiming expertise in the relationship between the Law and Jesus Christ, Paul basically says, *Well, if you want to compare resumes, hold my communion wine…*

"If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 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."

Paul is not some naive peddler positing that which he does not know. He is saying, *Don't try to tell me how to be Jewish, because you are out of your league*:"

circumcised on the eighth day — His place among the chosen people isn't new to Paul, he was born into it;

of the tribe of Benjamin — That's like someone here saying their family arrived on the Mayflower;

a Hebrew born of Hebrews — probably indicating that his family used Israel's native language at home;

as to the Law, a Pharisee — Paul was a card-carrying member of the party that obsessively sought to honor every jot and tittle of the Mosaic Law;

as to zeal, a persecutor of the church — Remember, before meeting Christ, Paul was leading the force persecuting the Christians, even supervising the stoning of Stephen.

In terms of stature, Paul (or Saul, as his name was before conversion) was near the summit of leadership in the religion of Israel. So, there was no use in questioning him about his Jewishness. Yet, in meeting Christ, a whole new world opened up before Paul. *"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. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ."*

Understand, Paul is not saying his faith tradition was of no value, and though he refers to his achievements in that tradition as *rubbish,* Paul's love

for his people and his faith in the God of Israel meant everything to him. You can see this in his letter to Rome — *"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh."* And also —*"as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."*

Paul is not trashing the faith tradition into which he was born, that which molded and shaped his identity and his love for God. Rather, what Paul is expressing here is the very experience Jesus had alluded to in his parables. *"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."* For Paul, this was not just a hopeful image, but had become a real lived experience. His faith had been of tremendous value to him, but now in the embrace of Christ's grace, the comfort of Christ's presence, the nurture of Christ's words, the light of Christ's path, Paul had been found by a treasure of surpassing value, to which everything pales in comparison.

What holds surpassing value for you? Think about your best friend, your confidante, the one who shares your laughter, sparks your joy, the one

without whom, you cannot nor would you ever want to imagine life without. What holds surpassing value for you?

Paul is saying, *I thought I knew life, had figured out what life had to offer and grasped it wholeheartedly. I thought I pretty much had this God thing wrapped up, but then I met this Jesus, and wow, a whole new world and life opened up for me, granting me meaning, joy, hope, peace, and purpose in ways I could not even imagine. God is much grander and nearer than I thought. And focusing on this one thing, this redeeming, sanctifying Jesus, reorients my worldview, expands my concept of mercy, transforms my relationships, and brings meaning and purpose to the whole of my life.*

Paul confesses — *"I want to know Christ."* This is not to earn the Lord's favor. The Lord's favor was a gift that could not be earned, and Paul had spent a lifetime trying to earn God's favor. Yet this gift found Paul, literally on the road to Damascus. This gift found Paul, and suddenly life was no longer about earning God's favor, but about living in grateful response to God's favor.

Now, most of the places I eat don't hire sommeliers. There's no goblet and bottle bearing expert coming to the table to pour a sip of Coca Cola to

get my approval before serving it. I've just never gotten into the whole wine thing, but I am impressed by those who can discern the notes and hints of a proper wine with just the smallest taste. Yet imagine a taste so pure you're immediately applying for a mortgage to buy the whole wine cellar. Or, perhaps, you read a short story from an author and immediately decide you must read every word she's ever written. Surpassing value. Cannot get enough of it, and to think, it was a gift, a gift that came with the whole library. That's what Paul means when he says, "I want to know Christ"

And so it is that Paul says, *"I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."*

It's the gift of meaning, purpose, and love from which you hope to wring every last drop. It's that good. Amen.