

Pastor's Message – 10/4/20
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

You may have heard the story about the pig and the chicken. They both one morning were being chased around the farmyard by a man who wanted ham and eggs for breakfast. The pig ran faster, so the tale goes, because it knew it would have to give its all, while the hen only had to make a contribution. Most of the time, we are like the hen when it comes to the vineyard, wishing to only give a little, but if we wish not to be thrown out of the vineyard, then we had better be willing to give our all.

Our Bible passages from Matthew and from Paul's Letter to the Philippians are truly about life and death. They are about judgment – yours and mine! The landowner is God and the vineyard is God's creation, which has been entrusted to us. Everything we have and possess is part of the vineyard. Our life is a story lived out before God. Does it show that we know or have the keys to life, now and forever?

First, do we realize that everything we have, including our very life, is not ours, but is only loaned to us? So, how do we answer the question, "To whom do I belong? As those who follow Christ, must we not say, "I belong to God?" Second, do we realize that if we try to hold onto the things of the vineyard, we will surely lose the most valued things in life?

Before Paul was converted to following Christ, before his experience of Jesus on the road to Damascus, he had it all together. He knew that he was a Jew from the best of stock. He knew that he was righteous. He knew that persecuting Christians was a good thing. Then his little apple cart got upset. God got hold of him and he was left with questions. Eventually, he did come up with answers, but they flew in the face of everything he had believed before.

In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul first recounts (verses 4b-6) and then utterly discounts (verses 7-8b) his "earthly" credentials. Paul writes of "confidence in [his] own efforts," meaning the achievements – by birth or individual effort – that gives us "credit" in the world's eyes. Using an accounting metaphor, Paul then offers an astounding image. Paul has crossed out all that was on the "profit" side and accounted it as "loss!" There is, for Paul and for any Christian, only one item on the credit side: Christ Jesus.

In our Bible passage today, Paul uses several rare Greek words and makes up a couple of his own to paint a picture of how life has been utterly transformed by his encounter with Jesus. The only credential that matters to him, and, he argues, should matter to any Christian, is being found in Christ and "moving on to perfection" (to use John Wesley's phrase), to the progressively challenging call of God in Christ Jesus.

People with their eyes on the prize don't look at their own credentials. They

do what Paul says he does: don't claim to have it all together, forget the past, strain toward God's future, and keep their eyes on Christ's calling alone. Everything else is distraction, destruction, or as Paul calls it in Greek, "skubala" (which the KJV quite accurately translated "dung").

These are the right credentials and the prize: "Being found in Christ, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings" (verses 9, 10). The prize Paul names here is what John Wesley expected Methodists ("the other sort of Christians") to be in his sermon, "The More Excellent Way:"

The other sort of Christians not only abstained from all appearance of evil, were zealous of good works in every kind, and attended all the ordinances of God, but likewise used all diligence to attain the whole mind that was in Christ, and laboured to walk, in every point, as their beloved Master. In order to this they walked in a constant course of universal self-denial, trampling on every pleasure which they were not divinely conscious prepared them for taking pleasure in God. They took up their cross daily. They strove, they agonized without intermission, to enter in at the strait gate. This one thing they did, they spared no pains to arrive at the summit of Christian holiness; "leaving the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, to go on to perfection;" to "know all that love of God which passeth knowledge, and to be filled with all the fulness of God."

Let's be honest. The prize Paul described and that Wesley elaborated may not be something most folks in any church are pursuing, or even want to pursue. People become part of churches for many reasons. Some want the programs congregations may offer for their families. Others seek personal affirmation or comfort. Others simply appreciate being part of a ritual community—the music, the ritual, the friends they make. But relatively few, as Wesley's sermon notes, "use all diligence to attain the whole mind that was in Christ." While some of these few may want to know Christ in the power of his resurrection, perhaps fewer still will want to be part of the "sharing of his sufferings." How many have, as their purpose in life, "to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead?"

Perhaps you remember the old saying: "It's no use crying over spilled milk." But did you know it's possible to use spilled milk to guide you on your way?

Our word galaxy comes from the Greek word galaktos, which means milk. What we in the Northern Hemisphere call the Milky Way is of course our own spiral galaxy as it looks to us on earth as we spin around a rather ordinary star circling on the edge of this island of stars. We know the Milky Way is composed of millions of stars, but the ancient Greeks thought it looked like spilled milk splashed across the night sky, and so they called it galaktos.

It is now known that certain animals use lights in the night sky to navigate on their great journeys. Birds, butterflies, and animals like seals, use the stars to guide them in their migrations.

One of the most interesting examples of using the night sky to navigate involves the large bug known as the dung beetle. These African insects fashion balls of animal manure from large animals such as elephants. These serve as food and as nesting places.

After building a big ball out of the waste material, they roll it away from the original pile of dung for safekeeping so other dung beetles don't steal the product of their hard work.

It is crucial they roll in a straight line. If they roll in a circle, they'll end up back where they started and might perhaps lose the dung ball. What do they use for a guide so they travel in a straight line?

Marie Dacke, a vision scientist from Lund University in Sweden, noticed that on cloudy nights dung beetles go astray. However, on nights when the sky is clear and the Milky Way is visible, she discovered dung beetles use the Milky Way as their guide so that they roll away their treasure in a straight line. They use the billions and billions of stars in our galaxy as a means of navigation to help them roll on top of their big ball of dung in a straight line.

Experiments in the lab that recreated the conditions of the skies produced the same result. Scientists took the dung beetles to a planetarium, where images of the night sky are projected on the ceiling to give the illusion that people are outdoors. The beetles traveled in a straight line when the picture of the Milky Way shone overhead. They traveled in a wobbly fashion when it was not.

Believe it or not, dung and one's guiding star come together in today's scripture from Philippians. The New Living Translation of the Bible which we heard today translates the Greek word *skubala* as "garbage" in Philippians 3:4b-14 when the apostle Paul, having listed his good qualities, notes: "I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ." But it's really a rather rude word, a vulgarity, and the King James is closer to the truth when it translates the word as "dung." It means all that and more. The earthiness of the passage is an attempt to remove the veil of politeness from the urgency, the raw aim of the good news, which is the importance of keeping one's eyes on the prize, to ignore the distractions of those who want to complicate the faith with unnecessary practices, so we might achieve the goal of knowing Christ, sharing in his sufferings, as well as in the resurrection.

For Paul, Jesus is the guiding star, the way (if not milky) to life eternal. Everything else is, well, you know.

How can you show in your life that everything else is rubbish compared to knowing Christ? Are your church attendance or contributions enough? Even if you are on the church council or serve on a Committee or Board or once taught in the Sunday school, is that enough? One test we can make of how high Jesus is on our agenda is when we determine which comes first: a football game, a new car, an item of clothing, a vacation, a family gathering, or a business responsibility. (You

may remember the runner Eric Liddell, who gave up a chance for an Olympic medal because he would not run on a Sunday?) We each have to determine where Christ rates in our life.

Our job is to produce good fruit for God's Kingdom. Not for OUR kingdom or OUR denomination or even our church, but for GOD'S kingdom. God is the rightful landowner, and everything we do should bring fruits for God's purposes, not our own. If we fail to do what the Lord, the landowner, requires, then the job will be handed over to someone else.

So the question we have to ask ourselves is: What does it mean to produce good fruit for the kingdom in our world today?

If we apply the parable we heard today to our situation today it forces us to ask some very hard questions about what we are doing. Are we working for God's kingdom, or are we working for our own kingdom? Is there a difference? If so, what is the difference? What systems of measurement do we have that can help us to focus on producing fruits for God's kingdom rather than our own? How can we make sure that everything we do is for the glory of God? We each have to decide why we do what we do and what we value in this life? This decision is not a once in a lifetime decision, but is an ongoing, everyday recommitment.

Paul, as we heard, compares the Christian life with a long distance race. The athlete who persists in pressing toward the finish line with the last ounce of strength will complete a successful run. Persistence is key to living a vibrant and well-lived life as disciples of Jesus Christ. The life of Thomas Edison is a prime example of the power of persistence.

Edison received over 1,000 patents from the U.S. Patent Office, including ones for the phonograph, microphones, and the incandescent electric lamp. Without the work of Edison, it would be impossible for us to project the words of our Power Point onto our screen or livestream them to all the people who are watching or will watch this worship service, read at night by light, or even listen to the radio. The world of communication owes an invaluable debt of gratitude to the "Wizard of Menlo Park," as Edison was dubbed. Edison also had failures! When reminded that he had failed over 25,000 times while experimenting with the storage battery, Edison is reported to have responded, "No, I didn't fail. I discovered 24,999 ways that the storage battery doesn't work."

This church and each person in this church must have has our focus and goal Jesus Christ and the goals, expectations and desires of Jesus. He is the prize and disciples of Jesus follow Jesus and work at becoming more like Him. Our goals must be His goals; our mission must be His mission. That's why we open the ears of our hearts to listen and hear the direction that Jesus has for us and for this church. That is why our plans must be His plans. That is why our guiding star must be Jesus. Everything else is, well, you know, skubala.