

Philippians 3 - Rubbish

In our Epistle lesson Paul counts everything as loss when compared to Christ.

I think we underestimate the significance of that statement.

I think we hear that and say, “well Jesus is first place, so everything else compared to him isn’t as good. He is the highest rung on the ladder. And if you aren’t first your last, you lose. So everything, even the second place rung, which is the first loser, is a loss compared to Christ.”

So far so good? “See? We get it, Paul.”

This breaks down, however, when we get to the second half of verse 8. “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish...”

And so, for Paul, anything that is below Jesus on the ranking system isn’t just the first loser, it isn’t just the silver medal... it’s garbage! It’s the skubala word – dung!

Paul had been telling the Philippians about his great lineage, his great zeal, he knew the law, he had kept the law better than most – all things highly valued by the Jews, all things thought to bring one closer to God, to save even!

Paul sees and valued all those things but then, on that road to Damascus, he sees something else. He sees the risen Lord. And as the scales fall from his eyes, literally, he sees Christ’s righteousness and power and might and HIS saving work on the Cross and the empty tomb – did you notice how prominent the resurrection plays in our reading today?

And Paul looks at all that, then turns back to his genealogy, and learning, and all those things he used to put so much value in and notices that... those things start to stink a little don’t they?

And so we Lutherans, Grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, we pump our fists in agreement.

“That’s right, Paul, all those works are rubbish, dung rags.”

And that is very true! But his language is even more broad than that. He says “everything,” he says “all things,” compared to Jesus start to stink a little.

And this is where it gets provocative – and with using a word like skubala I think Paul wants it to be just that – provocative – scandalous!

The things he valued the most, he called them dung, rubbish, fit for the landfill. Are we ready to call the things we value most the same?

Remember our Ladder, God is at the top, of course (and how honestly can we say that all the time?), and right below that is family, health, what else do you love and value?

Are you beginning to see what Paul is saying? Do you see the magnitude of it? He says these things we value and take such pride in... that promotion – garbage. The money that you find so much comfort and convenience in? – put it in a landfill. New car? Rusty tin can. Your looks and popularity? A reflection in a sewage puddle.

In South Dakota I saw families fall apart over land. They loved land, they valued it, and why not? Their father worked it, and their grandfather did too. Defy anyone who would ever dare take it from them – even if it was family. Over their cold dead hands! Blood, sweat, tears, hopes and dreams! And they make it their idol. So that they will sacrifice any relationship and anything to keep it. And what for? Try as they might they will die and it will be given to another, not that it was ever really theirs, for the earth and all therein belongs to the Lord. And sure, you can even bury them on it, but then there they are and they begin to stink a little...

Paul looks at that prime agriculture land and says – “it’s a wasteland.” A wasteland, compared to an eternal promised land where the land is made new and no thorns raise up, or weeds, and where we might rejoice in God’s provision along with fathers and grandfathers, because the land doesn’t save them, either, but Jesus does and he will unite those generations in a New Creation where someone might want to just be about farming... why not them? Unless of course they ruin it all over a piece of dirt in this broken world...

And now I’ve picked on the farmers, dare we turn this on ourselves? What do we value the most? Consider the little child! The grandkids! Ah! But I might ask you, do our children save us or do we save them? We can bubble wrap them and give them the best we have to offer, but if that saved them why do we still worry so much? We worry because we know we can’t save those precious kids and should the cancer or car accident come their way we are despondent! Why, because we know we can’t save them! And so Paul says, no, it’s all loss compared to Christ, the One who can save them and us – lets commend them to him!

And we can go on - Our degrees? Our leisure? All these things we love and value so much, compared to Jesus and his resurrection, compared to him who gives wisdom and knowledge unto eternal life in a Kingdom and celebration where all shame is washed away... Paul says it’s an insult to even compare the two.

We spend BILLIONS on medicine to give us 5 more years, ten more years, even 50 more years... Paul laughs. “What are you even talking about?” he’d ask. “What is that compared to the everlasting life Christ gives? “It’s a scandal to compare the two! Skubala.

And now let's be clear. Paul is giving a *comparison*. In chapel I asked the children if an elephant was big. They all said "yes." Then I asked, what if we compare it to the Grand Tetons? Not so big anymore, right? Comparison.

And so don't leave this text thinking medicine, money, land, and children are bad. That's not Paul's point. In fact his point is made stronger by the very fact he picks gifts of great value. His point is just that – look at the very best we have going on down here, look at all these great things, *and then see how much greater Christ is!* Look at this good – and then look at the goodness of Jesus! It's an elephant to a mountain. It's the goodness of a broken world where all we see gets old and dies, compared to an eternal glory and resurrection!

And yet we sacrifice so much to these things, we chase after these things, "I'll pray to God as a last resort when everything else down here doesn't seem to be working out." Or "I won't believe in a God who won't provide for me, maybe I'll just provide myself," or "I'll believe God's Word insofar as it doesn't conflict with my other priorities.." Are you serious? If Christ is Risen (Paul reminds us that he is, by the way) If Christ is Risen, what other priority is there?!

Yes we can rejoice in the earthly gifts God gives us and his word informs us how to be good stewards of them. But compared to Christ... what are we even talking about? We cannot calculate the exchange rate on eternal life. What factorial would you place on it? The math is bonkers! The efficiency and return is exponential! It's the easiest equation there is.

CS Lewis has a decent quote, He says, "If you aim at the earth you miss heaven. But if you aim at heaven you get the earth thrown in."

And yet we cling so desperately to our conveniences and the things of this world. And I admit I struggle to practice what I preach here, this is hard. I grumble at traffic too! Lord help us! Help us to see the surpassing worth of the resurrection!

May the Lord reorient our perspectives. May the promises of Jesus continually, like a mountain, stand tall, over and against, all we see down here in the valley. And may it not only give us perspective, but may it also give us a renewed and constant hope.

Because God looked at you and instead of seeing stinky skubala that we are because of our sins, he saw a priceless treasure which he would make new and make clean.

If you got mad at me for bringing up the children, consider that when the Father saw you in the garbage heap of a broken world, he sent his child, His Son, to die. And the Son went willingly. Yes, he considered his life of no importance and threw it away like rubbish? Is that blasphemous to say? He considered your life for his and said, “Yes, we will keep yours, and I will forfeit mine.”

And to atone for our idolatrous greed and our messed up priorities, he suffered. He died, faithful to the end, the sinless one, the one deserving of the kingdom and life everlasting, He goes to death, to a grave. Nicodemus took spices with him when he helped Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus and, look it up, book of John, he brought spices with him. We also know the women bring more Sunday morning. Why? Because the omnipotent, perfect, and sinless One, is dead... it's starts to stink... kind of like all our vain hopes and messed up values and priorities... And so he dies, a lifeless, bloody corpse that we might be washed clean and brought to life eternal according to His promise.

And those promises are true, why? Because the Son is Risen, stronger than all we can imagine. The Holy One does not see corruption, no he overcomes it. And here we are back again, at a resurrection, and I think that's exactly where Paul wants us and the Philippians to be: mindful of Christ's resurrection, and resting in his promises that he will make it "our own." You have been called by name, his promises are sure, sealed in the death and resurrection of the Son. Find rest and reason for certain Hope, and a whole lot of joy – in that Good News. In Jesus' name. Amen.