

5th Sunday of Lent
Sermon 4.7.19

Philippians 3:4b-14

If 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, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 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. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, 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, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

A colleague was in a confessional mood. Reflecting on his secure, settled life, he wondered if it diminished the vibrancy of his faith. An Episcopal priest in a lovely country parish, a gray-haired man with a marriage and a pet dog and a reliable car, he wondered if all the regularity that had come to rule his life, though gently, had made him a less faithful follower of Christ. "How much spontaneity is required of us?" he wondered that day. "How much skin-of-our-teeth and seat-of-our-pants?" I wondered back. "Is having retirement savings okay? Is looking forward to Social Security a mark against a life of faith?" He was laughing now.

We each took a moment, though, each imagined the many people we each know who live near the edge, with wolves ever at the door, with subsuming chaos just one stomach bug away, one sick day from work away. "That's living by faith, not by sight," either one of us might have been able to say at that quiet moment. "As for us...?"

As for me? Maybe when I was younger. Maybe when I was in graduate school, briefly living *la vie Bohme*. *La vie* Cambridge.

I read a book recently by a woman whose father seemed to live life that way, to raise his family in such a way as was ever testing the reliability of divine grace—or dumb luck, depending on who you ask. *Educated*, by Tara Westover has received high praise (from the *New York Times*, from Barack Obama, from Bill Gates, from *Psychology Today*), but not from me. A memoir about Westover’s childhood raised in a large, patriarchal, off-the-grid, end-of-days, survivalist family of Mormon fundamentalists, *Educated* felt like it would have its reader bear witness to something even the writer wasn’t capable of fully bearing, detached as she seemed from her own experience, unmoved, which had me feeling manipulated, as if she were enlisting me to do her emotional heavy lifting. It felt like misery porn, like there were thrills to be found amidst the degradation. “Why are you telling me this?” I kept wondering, which is a strange question to ask of any memoir, redounding back on the reader, “Why are you reading this?”

To be honest, it reminded me of a book I wrote called *Me and My Bad Times I’ve Had*. I was five years old, and I had suffered. A bee sting, poison ivy. I touched a stove burner when it was hot. My mother still has the book, though it was never published—so maybe this is all just professional envy.

No.

Not incidentally, actually central to the whole experience was the likely fact that the patriarch of the family has bipolar disorder. It had him often charismatic and charming, but just as often paranoid and hyper-religious, sure of himself as a frequent vessel for a word from the Lord, though these words, prophesies, declarations were arbitrary, with no coherence from one dictate to the next. It had him functioning as a demi-god in this realm he’d created, exercising control (if chaotic, reactive control), demanding deference (though just as often shrinking away at the first sign of a fight), and prohibiting any involvement in outside structures or authorities.

So, no schools for these kids.

And no hospitals following their many accidents, and no health care in spite of their countless head traumas, 3rd degree burns, broken bones, broken backs, and mood and mental disorders.

No birth certificates or Social Security numbers or membership in a larger society.

And no police, no thought even of the police, though the police could have come in handy when Westover's brother threatened to kill her with the bloody knife that he'd just used to kill one of their dogs and which later he laid calmly in her hand with the promise that this is how he'd do it.

Lending to this totalitarian terror-state (if a tiny one) was bad theology, though this also went unexplored in the book.

I think Westover's father liked having removed all the social structures that give life shape and stability and security. I think he thought this proved himself a faithful man, wholly reliant on what he took as providence—all those near misses. I think he felt the many brushes with death that each and all suffered as evidence that he was the sky-god's most trusted prophet, fiercest defender, truest son. Westover doesn't appear to wonder this, but I did, and I do, particularly this week, with Paul's disavowing of all that had come before in his life—his high birth as a Hebrew born of Hebrews, his privileged socio-religious position as a member of the tribe of Benjamin, his excellent formal education as an eventual Pharisee, his most zealous zeal, his most blamelessness before the Law of God. All of these things, he claimed, he now counts as loss. All he wants to know, according to what he wrote to the Philippians, is Christ.

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

Well.

If Christ is what you want to know, too, then you might be interested to know that we're six days before the Passover here, when Jesus had come to Bethany according to the Gospel of John. He had just days earlier been here, as well, at Lazarus' tomb for Lazarus having died four days earlier still. He had stood with Martha and Mary, all three of them weeping, the sisters for the loss of their brother and Jesus for his knowing that to bring Lazarus back to life would be to bring upon himself the punishment of death.

Consider, this raising of someone four-days dead would be his greatest sign yet. In this gospel of signs, this raising of Lazarus would be the greatest one Jesus would commit—and it would attract attention. It would attract a following, far bigger and more powerful than even the following he'd gathered so far. Then, of course, it would attract the attention of the religious authorities, the self-defending of the religious authorities.

...which it did indeed do.

According to the story, when some Pharisees went to the chief priests to tell them what Jesus had done in raising Lazarus, the council asked, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy places and our nation.”

At this, though, Caiaphas, the high priest, said to them, “You know nothing at all. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” So from that day on they planned to put him to death, making it so Jesus no longer walked openly but stayed on the edge of the wilderness—that place beyond human authority, beyond social constructs, beyond the protections and the exploits of civilization, out where God alone reigns.

Tara Westover’s father would have approved, would have been waiting for him there.

But this I want to reiterate: this is why Jesus wept at Lazarus’ tomb, not for Lazarus who would soon be alive again, not for Mary or Martha or all the others who’d loved Lazarus and who now mourned the loss of him, but for he himself who, in raising Lazarus, would be condemning himself to death. He wept because he knew this was the beginning of the end for him.

And it’s okay that he wept over his own death. It’s not selfish that he’d have done so. No, for this means that what he faced really was death. Not some show of suffering, not some spectacle “as if,” but real.

Remember reality? Lots of people seem not to. Lots of people seem never to have known reality, never to have had it push itself on them, as a limiting force, as a humbling, even shaming, force. We’ve put a lot of those people in charge—of business, of politics, of culture. And there are those who’d claim what we’re doing here is the greatest un-reality of all. The myths of religion, the stories of faith (raising people from the dead, turning water into wine): these would strike some people as the height of unreality. For me, though, the wonder of following Christ is that it ever pulls me back to reality, deeper into its hard edges and sharp corners, more fully into its suffering and its hope. The wonder of Christianity, of this faith formed around the eternal living God who yet became flesh, which was to limit himself so to live among us, is that it’s so astonishingly real, calling us not simply to believe something or to study something or to stay away from some certain things but to *do* something. *Do* redemption. *Do* hope. *Do* love.

Jesus wept.

It was time, but for this moment of reprieve, six days before the Passover.

A dinner, where Martha served, Lazarus sat speechless as if still recovering and coming to terms, and Mary anointed Jesus with the perfume she'd bought for the day of his burial, which wasn't today but was today fast coming into view, so why not?

Judas had a couple reasons why not—namely that the purchase of nard in the first place was obscene. \$20,000 would be its equivalent cost today, about what a laborer could earn in a year—which means Judas was right, a lot could have been done with that money other than perfume. They could have given that money to the poor.

They could have given that money to the poor!

Worse, though, is Jesus' defense: "You'll always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me," which sounds pretty arrogant, pretty callous.

The thing is, he's also right. I mean, we can't help as a species but to build social structures, to build civilizations—and these are invariably hierarchical, with a negotiation of power lesser and more, and with a bottom layer. There is always the bottom layer. It can't be otherwise. In fact, our attempts at making it otherwise have resulted in the worst of human behavior—guillotines, gulags. It's actually even worse, though, because power seeks itself out, wealth funnels itself upwards, ever further depriving those already deprived.

And charity only goes so far. Even the charitable giving of big gifts—\$20,000!—only goes so far. Trickle-down economics really only trickles.

What Jesus would have us do instead is ever endeavor to make more radical changes to the structures of society that persist in giving us "the poor." What Jesus would have us do is remain ever vigilant as regards this terrible truth that inherent to life incarnate, inherent to life in the material world, is this drift (or riptide) into a way of functioning that gives us people for whom \$20,000 is pocket change and those for whom it's the difference between life and death. What he would have us do is reject the notion that private donations are equal in value to public investment.

Yes, what the worship of Jesus would have us know is that Betsy DeVos's private giving to the likes of the Special Olympics is far less to be preferred than a public declaration that the Special Olympics is an event to be treasured by the public and by our public treasure, as life-

affirming for a few, which means life-affirming for us all. These Special Olympians aren't charity-cases; they're valued members of our society.

Yes, what devotion to Jesus would have us do is reject the chump change of Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family, to demand instead their participating in a public investment on the scale of the crisis they began. To be clear, their surrendering \$270 million dollars to the state of Oklahoma is nice and all, but that's only .027% of the \$10 billion the company and family have raked in for the deceptive sales of opioids in three years alone. (That's equivalent to a middle class family, over three years earning \$100,000 a year, giving \$81 for some worthy cause. That's how surrendering \$270 million dollars will feel to Purdue and the Sacklers--\$81 for thousands of lives lost, hundreds of thousands of lives devastated, whole economies undermined and public coffers emptied out. Talk about being unresponsive to reality.)

Really, what Mary did with that \$20,000 on that portentous day two millennia ago, this act of devotion, this act of revelation of the worthiness of her devotion: it was also an act of investment whose payouts the world may yet be enriched by, that is if we each and all, or if we any, have the courage of Mary's conviction. Her treasuring Jesus might mean our treasuring Jesus which would mean our treasuring a building up of the sort of society that affirms and allows abundant life for all. When she spent a year's wages on this sign of who Jesus would be to history as to eternity, she spent seed money for the world's salvation, in the great beyond, and more pressingly in the here and now.

The poor will indeed ever be with us, are indeed among us in the very room, and therefore it is the world's lifelong project to love as Jesus loved that no building up of a society will do so irrespective of, and unresponsive to, the poor—the poor in resources, the poor in spirit, the poor in capability, the poor in health.

You'll notice, of course, that I'm thinking in terms of society, of its structures and levers of implementation and power. And I suppose this is one measure of which wing of the church you're dealing with. The right wing of the church has tended to emphasize individual sin and need for salvation, private piety and acts of charity, while the left wing of the church has tended to emphasize structural sin and the need for justice to be built in and lived out. And while I think the church has implications for the individual and the social, for each and for all, I find myself much more concerned these days for our shared life than for any of our private lives.

Our shared life is so harsh, so heartless and brutal; and I fear it's going to get worse before it gets better; and for this I'm doubling down on my commitment to it. But I do so knowing this comes with a small measure of risk, for the more comfortable any of us are in the world, the more we might forget the true value to be found in the realm of God. This is why the wealthier a society becomes, the more its members tend to fall away from seeking after the transcendent; the more beneficent the world comes to feel, the less any of us might remember the God of all blessing, the God of all hope. Really, the more reliable the structures of civilization come to be, the more the people will rely on these as if they're absolute, essential—which can put us to sleep, make us unresponsive to reality, or can deprive us of the spirit of life.

I think this is the understanding Paul had come to by the time he was writing to the church in Philippi—he'd come to rely on the civilizational success he'd won, and good for him for having won it. It's no small deal to be so zealous, so blameless, so smart. But the degree to which these achievements foreclose on the surprising work of the spirit in life, the degree to which such blessing starts to feel merit-based and proof of essential worthiness, the degree to which the protective structures of a well-ordered life amount to an unmooring from actual reality or an untethering from actual responsibility is the degree to which Paul would count these things as loss, and I would count them as loss as well. That said, the degree to which such blessing bestowed upon us each and all as to strengthen us for the work of self-giving love is the degree to which we have come to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death—suffering not for the sake of suffering, suffering not for the thrill of it or to prove some weird specialness, but suffering in service of love and true life for neighbor, for stranger. With a lot to lose it's also clear that this is what the having of it is for in the first place.

Thanks be to God.