

"What's in Your Trash?"
Philippians 3:4b-14

October 8, 2017

19th Sunday after Pentecost

"What's in YOUR wallet?" Most of us recognize that as a tagline from a television commercial for a certain credit card. The selling point for this company, I suppose, is that their card is the best and most valuable credit card there is and that you should be holding on to that card in your wallet and using it because of its value. That card will do great things for you, so the claim is made, such as a lower interest rate on the purchases you charge, a greater number of "perks" offered to you in terms of rewards and money back to enjoy, a wider area of acceptance for that card to be used by you, and so on. A lot can be known about you from what you value highly and what you value highly can be shown, the commercial implies, by what credit card you have.

While it is true that a lot can be known about you from what you value, the way to determine this is not by which credit card is in your wallet. A better way of looking at this is, to paraphrase the question in the commercial, ask, "What's in YOUR life?" In other words, what are the things that you value in life? What do you fervently hold on to and keep in your life because they give you comfort and care now and hope and assurance for the future? Another interesting question besides, "What are you holding on to that is valuable?" Is, "What are you getting rid of that is no longer valuable?" Instead of asking, "What's in YOUR wallet?", Ask, "What's in YOUR garbage?"

Of course, determining what constitutes "garbage" (that is, what is of no value and should be tossed) is just as difficult as determining what is of value and should be held onto. There is an old saying that says, "One man's trash is another man's treasure." There are things that may look valuable or which possess some sentimental value, but which are, in reality, trash. While its easy to throw out the banana peels, coffee grounds, egg shells, old newspapers, and the like, it's the other stuff – the stuff that appears to be valuable – that is hard to throw out. And, by holding onto too much garbage, you have no room for that which is truly valuable.

All of this relates to what Paul is talking about in our epistle reading today. In taking inventory of his life, he is talking about figuratively "taking out the trash" – that is, doing away with that which is not valuable in his life, even though it may appear to be valuable, in order to leave only that which is truly valuable in his life.

He begins our text with a brief resume of things in his life. He has fulfilled all necessary religious rituals. He was circumcized on the 8th day. He has a fine religious pedigree. He is a purebred Jew – a Hebrew of Hebrews – who was descended from the tribe of Benjamin, one of only two tribes that had not faded into obscurity during the Exile hundreds of years before. Not only that, but he belonged to one of the elite religious groups of his day – the Pharisees. He was very zealous in religious matters, a persecutor of this unorthodox movement led by Jesus. He was morally pure and religiously righteous. He observed the law of the Lord to the nth degree.

Now, all of that would seem to be very positive and the treasure in his life – the stuff that he would want to hold on to because it was so valuable. But Paul says

something very surprising. He says that he counts all of these things as a loss – a negative thing. It is such a negative thing to Paul that he says that twice.

Then he goes even further. He counts these attributes and all things that he has accomplished as rubbish. Now that doesn't sound so bad. "Rubbish" is such a benign word. However, the word he uses for rubbish literally means "dung", "manure", or "excrement". (We could think of crude modern day names for this which would accurately portray the meaning but which we wouldn't use in church.) Paul views his achievements, his religiosity, and all that he has as being worth no more than a big pile of...well...you know what.

Why? It's not that that these things are necessarily bad or wrong. It was a good thing to be circumcized, to be one of the Chosen People – the Jews, to be religiously zealous, and morally pure. But Paul says that there is something so much better that it makes all of these other things pale in comparison and look like a loss, rubbish, and manure.

And what could possibly be so much better? He speaks of "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." To know Christ means to be found in Him, that is, to be joined to Him. Paul says that this means "not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." To be declared right before God through faith meant to Paul that he would share in Christ's sufferings and death that he might also share in Christ's resurrection.

Can you relate to Paul's struggle here and his conclusions? What is the treasure in your life? What is the trash in your life?

Maybe your life and your resume is similar to Paul's. Maybe you take pride in the fact that you have completed necessary religious rituals such as baptism and confirmation. Maybe you are proud of your religious pedigree as a lifelong Christian and a strong member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Maybe you like the fact that you are zealous in fighting for orthodoxy and condemning false doctrine in other churches. Maybe you feel pretty good about the morality of your life – that you not only don't commit big sins like robbery or murder, but that you also obey every minute religious rule.

Do you find these to be the things upon which you hang your life and base your hope for the future? Or, like Paul, can you see these things as a loss, rubbish, and even excrement, comparatively speaking, not because they are necessarily bad but because you have something that is far greater – something that is so awesome that it makes these good things pale in comparison?

That something which you have is the same thing Paul had: Christ. Knowing Jesus Christ makes all the difference in the world in your life. All the things that we see and have and enjoy in this world, no matter how important or valuable to us, will ultimately be gone through decay, death, or destruction. God and His Kingdom are the only things which will last forever.

The things which we often hang our hopes on – the performance of religious rituals, our orthodoxy, our zealousness, and our morality – can do nothing to get us a

right relationship with God or entrance into His Kingdom. As good as they might be, they are not good enough to make any headway with a holy God.

Knowing Christ, though, does. Being “in Christ” makes all the difference in the world. When you were baptized, you were baptized into Christ Jesus. That means you have a righteousness – a right standing before God – that does not depend upon you – how religious you are, how orthodox you are, or how moral you are. It is a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. It is a righteousness which is not from you, but from God and which He gives freely to all who believe. It is a righteousness that allows you to approach God confidently now and a righteousness that will allow you to stand before God without fear on the Day of Judgment.

To know Christ is to share in His death and then to share in His resurrection. Your baptism connects you to Jesus’ death. That means His death is counted as the payment for all of your sins, all your mistakes, and all of your failures to do the good that God requires of you. That is how you become right before Him.

Your baptism also connects you to Jesus’ resurrection. That means that His resurrection from death to life has become the promise, assurance, and guarantee of your own resurrection from your death to life forever in heaven with Him.

Can you see why it’s so important to know what the trash in your life is? You don’t want to end up depending on anything – good or bad – that’s going to mess up the best thing you could ever have – the thing that is going to last for eternity.

So, how do you get rid of this trash? How can you keep yourself from depending on that which cannot save you before God? Paul puts it this way: “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” In other words, it doesn’t mean that you have to deny your religious heritage, be unconcerned about orthodox teachings, or forego living a moral life. These are not bad things. Simply don’t depend on these things to make you right with God or hang your hope for the future on them.

Instead, look back to what you already have in Christ with such intensity and of such value what you will have that all these other things seem to be “trash” in comparison. Strain forward to see what you will have in Christ. Press on toward the prize which is not in you, your heritage, your actions, or in this life, but is in Christ Jesus, in God’s grace, in the upward call to heaven and eternal life.

Trash is never something good to have around, whether it is literal trash in your garage or figurative trash in your life. Trash can make a mess of your life in either instance. Even that which is good can *seem* like trash if it distracts your attention from what is really important in your life. So, take some time to see what is, by comparison, truly the trash in your life – any achievement or any activity on your part which is apart from Christ and take it out. What you are left with is Christ – all that He has done for you in His life, all that He has given to you through His death, all that He promises you through His resurrection, and all that He has in store for you – the prize of the upward call of God in Him. That’s all that’s important. That’s all that you need. That’s everything! Amen.