

What an utterly arrogant man Paul must seem with those words, “If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more.”

I’ve tried to think of what that translates to in modern terms.

“If anyone has reason to be confident in their education, I have more.” I like that one.

“If anyone has reason to be confident in their wealth, I have more.” I’d like to like that one, but it’s probably not going to happen.

“If anyone has reason to be confident in their looks, I have more.” I’d do bad things to look like I looked when I thought I looked bad ten years ago.

“If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more.” This is probably one of those passages that cause people to say, “I don’t mind Jesus, but I have a few issues with Paul.”

I don’t know whether Paul was arrogant or not, but I do know he had a pedigree that meant that if he wanted to, he could be counted among the spiritual elite of the Judaism of his day, and yet he came to find something that changed his life. He found the hard-won personal faith that comes from encountering suffering and finding meaning in Jesus. So in the turn of phrase that yields the hymn words, “my richest gain I count but loss,” Paul tells what changed in his life.

Paul had plenty to brag on, but in a moment, because of his experience of faith, of encountering the risen Christ, he tells us with a rhetorical flourish, he has come to regard as little more than fertilizer the things that had once seemed so important to him. Has that ever happened to you?

Paul says that he gave it all up. But let's be clear: it wasn't trash that he gave up, he just came to regard it as trash because of the surpassing value of Christ. Because what Paul gave up was of great value, of tremendously important value. He didn't give it up because it was bad or because he didn't want it anymore. He gave it up because his perspective changed.

I know I've told you this story before, but indulge me.

A missionary couple had lived for years in China, so long that they had acquired a lifetime of stuff, things that they needed and valued from along the way. The timing of their work in China was such that they were present for the communist revolution, and remained, under house arrest, for a number of years after the communist government took over. After years of political wrangling, their departure was secured. The word came amidst great excitement, you may go home. Their exit visas were in order, they were told that of their lifetime of accumulated stuff, they could leave with exactly two hundred pounds of their belongings between the two of them. Two hundred pounds only from a lifetime of accumulation. Oh, I absolutely must have that. Aunt Rachel's vase, father's Bible...But if you take that, I must leave this...each item loaded into the suitcase was a transaction in value- in what was important to them. Finally, the appointed day arrived and they proceeded to the airport with their children and their carefully weighed suitcases, the sum of which was two hundred pounds. As they cleared customs, they were asked the appropriate questions, finally the question: have you weighed the children? But, wait...No, we haven't. Weigh the children. Two Hundred pounds. All the rest is rubbish, trash in an instant.¹

¹ Attributed to Fred Craddock.

Paul didn't say that everything he had held dear was no longer of value, he simply said that he came to regard it differently.

What could bring about such a change? What could inspire Paul so much that he would simply turn away from a heritage generations deep?

It's not what, it's whom.

I hope each of you came to worship today because you want to encounter Jesus.

But let's be honest: there are times when, in a fit of absolute honesty, even the most resolute Christian must question in their heart of hearts whether or not a first century Palestinian peasant who died the death of a political prisoner two thousand years ago has any relevance for today. There must certainly be times when we can consider whether the ethical teachings and the miraculous healings with which I confess I am endlessly fascinated, but that we have not personally witnessed, are food enough to feed us when we stare down the realities that rob us of faith. Because those realities do invade our lives.

And I confess that if we rely solely upon the second hand accounts of some crumbled loaves and pickled fish, if we rely solely upon the theologized tales of healed lepers and forgiven prostitutes and people raised even from the dead, we may be inspired, we may even walk a little taller and straighter, but I am not certain that we will be changed.

I can't say for sure that we'll stake a claim of confidence in those stories.

But what if we encounter a person?

I am very aware that we don't get to see Jesus personally, in the flesh.

No, if we're to encounter Jesus, it is going to have to be through each other.

That is a powerful charge to carry, isn't it?

We can't do it alone – no matter how intelligent, wealthy, good looking or pedigreed we are, if we want to meet Jesus, we're going to need each other for that.

We have to be careful that we don't make an idol out of Jesus – you know what an idol is, it's an object of faith that we can control – and I can't think of a better failsafe against making Jesus into an idol than having to encounter him through his body.

You see, if I make a really good version of Jesus up in my mind, no matter how confident I am in my education, but you reflect the real Jesus back to me in your actions and in your living, my idol is going crumble.

That's why it's so important that we come to this table that Jesus has set – not sporadically and haphazardly, every once in a blue moon when we feel like rolling out of bed and wandering into church and it happens to be a communion Sunday, but intentionally, and over, and over, and over, and over, and over, and over again.

There is something that happens when we come to this table over and over again. There is something about the marking of the seasons of our lives in liturgical time that changes our perspectives so that we can see Jesus when he is among us or beside us.

I can't tell you exactly what it is except that we all know that it happens. And to be honest, I'm not at all sure that it happens every time for every one of us. I sort of doubt it does. I may as well be honest about this, sometimes I'm not sure if it's the risen Lord Jesus I'm encountering or not. But in faith, we come to the table, believing that God will make it the feast of the lord, and Jesus will somehow be with us, and in that encounter, we'll give up what we're so confident of in order to place our confidence in someone.

The magisterial theologians have long determined that communion is a holy mystery. I can't tell you exactly what it is that happens because nobody knows exactly. We use all

sorts of language to describe the event of communion: you know the language of tradition: transubstantiation, consubstantiation, accidents, elements, real presence, it goes on and on. But nobody can tell you exactly what it is except that it is.

There is something though, about the act of coming together and celebrating the Lord's supper, and you know it when it happens. A fleeting feeling of continuity with centuries of disciples, a breathed reminder that this is the body of Christ, the bread of heaven, a whisper of a promise; the blood of Christ, the cup of the covenant. Something happens...Something changes...

A sacrament is, in the classic definition, the visible sign of an invisible grace. You remember what grace is: God's unconditional, unearned, unmerited love for us. *This* is the visible reminder of that love.

For the most part, we understand that, we come dutifully passing our silver plates with cubed bread stacked up on them and a few gluten-free wafers. I have a hunch we know we're up to something when we pass the heavy holsters with the little shot-glasses of Welch's grape juice – we know we're seeking somehow to find that something greater that we know is supposedly happening, elusively beyond our control...a visible sign of an invisible grace. We have hope that we are living as a covenant community keeping continuity with saints from every age, drawing our sustenance, holding each other up – creating the encounter with Jesus by being his body for each other.

I think we understand all these things, but rather than let ourselves risk the disappointment that perhaps this time, God will not feel present, perhaps this time I won't see the risen Christ – we set our expectations low.

But that is not what we have come to do. We have come to encounter Christ so that we see the world through Christ's eyes. We have come to be changed.

There is a moment, at the end of every service after I have preached, when I stop for a second and take my pause. It is just after I've taken off my microphone and handed it off, and then I step back into the sanctuary so I can finish worship with you. It is a moment when the choir is singing their response, giving us their benediction before the postlude ascends as the closing prayer of worship. I have this moment when I get to stand with you and encounter the sanctuary the way you do. A month ago on communion, as we finished worship and I walked out and turned at the door to the sanctuary, I caught a glimpse of the communion table. As we complete communion, Drew and I put the plates back on the table, sort of where they started, and then we put the lids back on the trays of wine. But what I have noticed, without fail, is that no matter how well we do, we just can't return the communion table to the way it looked before we got started sharing this heavenly meal. The bread is sitting there broken on the table, the juice has been poured...it's not a big change, but rather a little one, nothing is quite exactly where it started off. It's sort of the way a table looks a after the end of a great big family dinner... it's not the same... and neither are we.

And I thought to myself, this is God's table, where God's children have come to eat.

And I realized that when we look over that communion table at each other, its different from looking at each other any other way. When we look over that communion table at each other, we see the family of God. We see the body of Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.