

Sermon Philippians 3;4-14 3-13-16 Pastor Michael Schempf Zion Lutheran, Clyman, WI

This past week has brought pleasantly warmer temperatures. Have you noticed the tree buds starting to swell and a few sprouts poking through the ground? The first hints of spring are upon us. Right on the heels of lengthening days, warmer temps, and greener grass comes another right of spring called spring cleaning. Ah yes, what can you get rid of? What's been laying around long enough that it's no longer of any use? My uncle used to say, "If it collects dust more than three times, get rid of it." Coming soon to your neighborhood, signs will appear with those two big words: Garage Sale. You take stock of your possessions periodically and decide that some things just have to go. Things that you once wanted, you want no longer. Things that you once considered valuable are considered valuable no more. Out with it!

In the midst of his letter to the church at Philippi, St. Paul goes into full Garage Sale mode. It's not earthly treasure he's determined to pitch. He already traveled light when it came to stuff. His 'get rid of it' passion is focused on what he had once deemed his greatest spiritual treasure. What he formerly considered of ultimate value in his life he now recognized has no value at all. His spiritual treasure is fit only for the dumpster. Here's what he once treasured: "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the Law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness which is in the law found blameless" Paul, in his former life as Saul, cared deeply about his relationship with God. Living a God-pleasing life was his number 1 priority. How could there be anything wrong with that? He enumerates everything that he had in the 'plus column'. He was no 'Johnny-come-lately' in his relationship with God. It had begun at birth. Circumcised the eighth day, born to parents who were both Jews, descended from the tribe of Benjamin who after the Babylonian captivity had remained, along with the tribe of Judah, more intact than the other ten tribes; his spiritual pedigree was first class. He was a spiritual blue-blood. In addition to being born to the right family and right tribe, he had been doing all the right things. As a Pharisee, the strict sect that prided itself in keeping the laws of Moses to the last detail and even added some extra laws of their own, Saul was confident in his standing before God. Measured by the strict standards of righteousness of the Judaizers he was blameless. He had all his ducks in a row. If heaven's gates could have opened by any combination of these outward things, both by what he had inherited and what he had attained, Paul would have been able to walk right in. To Paul's spiritually blind eyes, everything he prided himself in before God he considered "gain".

But by God's grace, Paul had been led to see all these outward things in their true light. All those physical and supposed advantages did not gain righteousness for him. They only led him away from the righteousness that saves. God had led him to make that life-changing discovery. On the Damascus road the risen Jesus appeared to him. In that moment Paul saw himself as the wretched and helpless sinner that he really was. He experienced a complete change of heart;

a total reversal of values. The Savior he'd been attacking became his Savior. All the things that had been so precious to Saul the self-righteous Pharisee became forever useless to Paul the sinner saved by grace. "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." A footnote concerning that word "rubbish"; that Greek word was used for hay that had gotten moldy and smelled foul. Think of something that you discover in the back of your refrigerator. When you remove the lid, you cap it again very quickly. It looks horrible. It smells horrible. Yuck! It goes straight into the garbage. That's the word Paul uses to describe all his former righteousness. Rubbish? Stinkin rubbish? It stinks in comparison to having the righteousness he now possessed through faith in Jesus. The garage-sale analogy doesn't quite work here. While certain things have got to go from time to time, you can only sell what still has SOME value. The "rubbish" of Paul's own righteousness is 'refuse', garbage. We can't help but ask, "How could it be? Does good mean bad? Why should the good things that he did and the good person be considered rubbish?" Paul is driving home that his own righteousness, his own good life, YOUR own good works and my own good works do not merit God's favor. Being raised by Christian parents, having received Christian instruction, attending a Christian church, those are great advantages but they don't merit God's favor, they're not a ticket to heaven. God's love for you, His kindness and temporal blessings, the eternal joy awaiting you in the life to come...none of His good gifts are based on your having earned them. It is the perfect obedience of Jesus, His perfect life that counts before God. Jesus' perfect righteousness is applied to you through faith in Him.

So what's behind Paul's 'revved up' insistence that your own righteousness is not what counts before God and that only the righteousness of Jesus does? Here's why: Believing that God accepts you because of Jesus' righteousness, not your own, is the bedrock of your faith. That is the essence, the very heart of your relationship with God. Take away your righteousness in Christ and you are left with nothing but your own righteousness. (your own stinkin righteousness) This isn't something new. Paul is just repeating what he is always teaching. Vital information bears repeating. Consider how paramedics, fire-fighters, medical personnel; those whose job is about saving human life review the basics of saving lives, repeatedly. They must regularly go over the basics, like CPR. The Judaizers of Paul's day promulgated a lie, and people believe lies, especially lies about God. Paul has a powerful reaction. "It's time to review the basics of Christian faith." He zeroes in on one big lie in particular; their insistence that the outward act of circumcision was vital to salvation. Paul counters their lies with the saving truth. Not your effort to please God, but Jesus' perfect life, not your righteousness deeds, not circumcision, not anything you do, but the righteousness of Christ, that's what matters.

Paul understood that knowing and believing the truth vs. accepting a lie affects your relationship with God. It's the difference between doubt and confidence. It's the difference between never knowing where you stand with God and peace from knowing that you are secure because Christ's righteousness is your righteousness. Goodbye guilt. Goodbye troubled conscience. Goodbye life full of regrets. Satan loves to attack you with the guilt of your sin. His goal is to make you afraid and uncertain of where you stand with God. Your righteousness in Christ is the antidote to fear, the cure for a troubled conscience. The peace that comes from knowing that you are clothed with Christ's righteousness will not only be your greatest comfort when you approach death, (know that Satan WILL attack you and try to terrify you with memories of past sin) you will stand withstand his attacks when you remember that your righteousness rests in Christ.

Your righteousness in Christ is also what energizes your life right now. Another favorite attack of Satan is to rob you of any joy in living right now. Humorist Garrison Keillor, who knows a thing or two about Lutherans, loves to spoof Lutheran's sense of guilt. The "I a poor miserable sinner, a poor miserable stinkin sinner can translate into...woe is me!" That is a caricature that focuses entirely on the guilt of sin to the exclusion of forgiveness and the restored energy and vitality forgiveness brings. We are stinkin sinners but we don't stay stinkin. Because Jesus has cleaned us up and continues to clean us up through His forgiveness, that puts us back on our feet with a life to live...for Jesus sake. Paul says, "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." That upbeat, hopeful, forward looking outlook is not defeatist, not guilt-ridden, not 'woe is me' at all. It's the difference between just 'hangin in there' (ever hear people say that? How ya doin? Eh, I'm hangin in there)... the difference between hangin in there and really living; living with energy, hope, vitality. God has removed your stinkin sin by linkin you with the One who had no sin. When Jesus removes the guilt of your sin and replaces it with His righteousness, that's the key to really living, that's the way, like St. Paul to press forward with confidence. Knowing that God is for you not against you, believing that for Jesus sake you are good, you are righteous, you are perfect in God's sight, that's a world of relief, that's really living. Amen.