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A Letter from Paul – Philippians
VIII. To Gain Christ and To Be Found in Him
Philippians 3:1-11

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A story appeared in the news just over a week ago about a Goodwill worker in Texas going through a donated box of old video games and finding, amid all the useless stuff, a very rare old Atari video game called “Air Raid”. Only thirteen copies of this game are known to exist and, fortunately for Goodwill, this worker recognized the game immediately. It is not known whether the person donating this game knew its value – it’s not even known who this person was. But Goodwill was able to sell this old, rare, and by most accounts not very good game to a collector for over \$10,000.¹

Fred Craddock, wonderful preacher and teacher of preachers at Emory, could have been commenting on that story in a sermon he wrote years ago on our passage – a sermon in which he tells of cleaning out his garage and taking a trip to the local landfill:

In my opinion, what I threw away was useless. There were boxes, the bottoms of which had rotted out, and they seemed to be candidates for the landfill. There were creek waders that had a lot of holes in them. I tossed them. There was some bad birdseed. (At least, I assumed it was bad. I had planted some of it three times, and no birds ever came up. So I tossed it.) . . .

This is a common drama in everybody’s house . . . Things get used up . . . Things get broken, are no longer of any value, and they have to be disposed of. But once in a while, just once in a while, there is a case of somebody throwing away that which is very valuable. Something very good and very right gets tossed.²

And that is true, and indeed a part of our ordinary human experience. In throwing out the bad stuff, every great now and then we end up throwing out something good – like a rare \$10,000 video game.

But nothing in either of those two stories, nothing we encounter in any part of our ordinary human experience, prepares us for what Paul has to tell us this morning: that, in choosing to follow Jesus, Paul not only took to the landfill all the usual bad stuff – the sins, the bad habits, the wrong turns, etc. – Paul also took with him to the landfill and threw out, once and for all, all of the good stuff he owned! And what he tells us is that he didn’t toss any of this good stuff away by accident, but rather that he did so absolutely and positively on purpose:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . .

Paul didn't just throw away all the bad stuff – like in the standard Christian testimonial where the speaker talks about leaving behind the drugs, the crime, and other bits of a rather wild lifestyle. No, Paul let go of the most valuable things he possessed – his status, his achievements, his reputation among his peers, his position at his job. He threw away all of the good stuff he had spent a lifetime working to accumulate – the very stuff which, until he met Jesus, was the good stuff which he lived for, the good stuff which gave his life meaning and direction, the good stuff which he considered essential not only to his identity but also to his happiness – he threw it all away, the good stuff, just for Jesus. “*You know my pedigree,*” he writes to the Philippians:

A legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting Christians; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law book

The very credentials these [Judaizers] are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash – along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ.³

Paul didn't just throw away the bad stuff when he came to Jesus, he threw away all the good stuff too. But surely he didn't have to do that. I mean, surely Jesus didn't expect him to do that – surely Jesus doesn't expect us to do that! Why couldn't Paul have just done what we do? Forget all this tossing away of the good stuff, this plan of downward worldly worth Paul is talking about – he could have done what we do. Just add Jesus to our lives as they already are. Maybe make a few small changes around the margins – but, you know, mostly just join a church and stuff, pick out the Christian bits that you like and just ignore the rest, give a little money when it suits, serve on a committee now and then if you have to, get as much as you can out of the pleasures of this world and then die and go to heaven. Paul could have done that. We wouldn't have objected. No one would have objected – it's the safest way for getting involved with a confirmed radical life reformer like Jesus. Accept Him as your Lord and Savior – but then you've got to protect yourself, keep a little distance from Him, in order to have all we want out of this world and still have heaven too. Isn't that the better way, the safer way, the saner way?

So, what in the world would possess a man like Paul to think that he had no other choice – no, that he would happily and willingly do what he did – that he would throw away even the good stuff which had anchored his life before Jesus and given it meaning and status and a measure of satisfaction and success? Throw it away! Why would he do such a thing? And why does he seem to expect that you and I not only should do the same, but also that we ought to want to do this tossing away of the good stuff in our lives just as happily and willingly as he?

Maybe, maybe because Paul was willing to admit something that we mostly all know already, but nonetheless find very hard to admit. That all our good stuff, the stuff we count on to give us our identity, our purpose, our meaning, our safety and status and success in this world – the good stuff we are counting on to make our lives filled and fulfilled and happy – that even all that good stuff we cling to so tightly just isn't actually delivering the goods, not like we had hoped, and especially after all the effort we have put into those things. And that they probably never will. All of those trophies we have been chasing after and collecting – the grades, the degree, the house, the car, our sculpted bodies, exhilarating pastimes, likes and followers, clothing labels, all of those things and any of those things which we think are going to do the trick and finally make us satisfied and happy and at one with the universe – all those trophies nothing but a momentary pleasure when we get them, but which eventually leave us no closer to that ultimate prize than we were before. Maybe that's what Paul is telling us – to just up and admit it about even the good stuff. That as good as it is, it's never going to be enough, is it? It's never going to be able to deliver that something – almost unnamable something – which our hearts are longing for. That it's never going to bring us to that magical point where, at long last, we feel completely filled and fulfilled and happy and satisfied forever.

Maybe that's a part of why Paul thinks we ought to join him in dumping even all the good stuff – because he, like King Solomon before him, had discovered this truth about even the good stuff falling short: *"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?"*⁴ Maybe that's why Paul says what he says to us this morning.

But I don't think that's the whole reason, or even the most important reason. I mean, the good stuff may not work out in the long run, but what if it's all we've got? What if it is the only option available to us in this world – to just keep on collecting our trophies and hoping for the best and grabbing the fleeting happiness wherever and whenever we can find it? There's going to have to be a better reason than just that it doesn't in the end work out to convince us to join Paul in giving all that up, when it's all that we've got to hold on to and hope in. There's going to have to be something better out there for us to be willing to trade in the good stuff we've currently got.

And there is. That's the heart of what Paul is telling us this morning – there is. There really is something better than even all the good stuff we've currently got. Listen again to what Paul says. He is not really telling us that he gave up all the good stuff because it doesn't work out in the end. I mean, that is the truth, and Paul testifies to that particular truth in a whole lot of other places in his letters. But the real reason Paul gives here for giving up all the good stuff, and the real reason he thinks we should too, is not just because the good stuff isn't good enough – it is because he has actually found that something which is even better than all the good stuff. Better than all the good stuff put together and multiplied by a billion. He has found something that actually delivers where the good stuff never could. He has found something that is, in fact, so good, so real, so true, so everything exceeding all expectations, that giving up the good stuff in order to possess this new thing was, for him, a no-brainer. It was, in fact, the only reasonable thing to do.

And what is that new thing, that all-exceeding, greater than good thing Paul had found? Paul had found Jesus – and, in Jesus, he had found everything his life had been lacking, everything he had been longing for; everything he truly needed in order to filled and fulfilled forever:

*The very credentials these [Judaizers] are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash – along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant – dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ – **God's** righteousness.*

I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.⁵

“Because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . .”

When Paul found Jesus, he found everything. He found what his life had been made for, and what it was all about. He found grace and strength and purpose and strength and laughter and love and hope and happiness – and, most of all, a divine Friend and Companion and Guide and Comforter and Teacher and Fortress and Life-Giver and Life-Resurrector. *“To gain Christ and be found in Him.”* I mean, just think for a moment about all the things Jesus said to us, all those promises He made to us about what our lives would be like if we would come to Him, surrender all to Him, give ourselves over to Him completely. We've been reading those promises for a long time now, but have we really believed them, believed that they might just be true – believed Him? And could it be that what Paul has discovered, and what Paul is trying so very hard here to tell us, is that all those things Jesus said to us, all those promises, all of them are real and all of them are true – that they are all real-life here-and-now true, not mere wisps of unicorn dreams from some far-off Never-Never land? That all those things Jesus said to us, all those promises He made to us, that they are for real – that Paul has taken the plunge and found Jesus and His promises to be everything that they seem to be. And that, therefore, we should hear them anew, trust in them completely, and join him in throwing everything else away so that these promises, so that the One who makes these promises, can be ours?

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.⁶

*Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*⁷

*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*⁸

*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*⁹

*I am the true vine . . . Abide in me, and I in you . . . I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.*¹⁰

*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*¹¹

Yes, I think that is what Paul is telling us – that having surrendered all to Jesus, for Jesus, even all the good stuff – that what he, Paul, has found, and is now reporting back to us, is that it is all real, and that it is all true. And that a life surrendered to Jesus is exactly that life we are longing for. That it really is everything we were made for; that it really is everything we are hoping to find. To gain Christ and to be found in Him – that this, and this alone, is where the treasure lies, where the truly good things are to be found, and where we at last shall be filled and fulfilled.

But most of us, let us now confess, most of us lack both the courage and the conviction to do what Paul has done – to surrender all in order to gain Christ and to be found in Him. That just simply is the truth about us and about how deeply enmeshed, ensnared we are in the things of this world and with the way that things are. But let us then remember this – Paul didn't get there by his own courage and conviction and efforts either. In fact, Jesus had to personally knock him off his horse and blind him just to get his attention for a moment.¹² So, what are we supposed to do next? What, finally, do Paul's words mean for us this morning?

This, I think. Hearing Paul testify to us that it is all real and that it is all true, and that everything we are looking for and longing for really is found in Jesus – having his testimony in our heads and in our hearts – well, maybe then the next time our Lord Jesus comes especially close to us, as He is wont to do from time to time in these lives of ours, the next time He comes especially close to us and we hear Him calling out to us, we feel Him stretching out to us His divine hand filled with grace and love, well maybe then, just maybe, we too should, in that moment, find in Him and from Him sufficient courage and conviction to take a further step in the direction of what Paul has done. To throw it away, even the good stuff, in order to gain Christ and to be found in Him.

¹ <https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/local/vintage-video-game-donation-nets-goodwill-north-central-texas-more-than-10000-dollars/287-960dcde9-90ea-4ed9-b5bc-83b0eb1d1386> .

² Fred B. Craddock, "Throwing Away the Good Stuff," in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 246

³ Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2140.

⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:2-3.

⁵ Peterson, p. 2140.

⁶ Matthew 11:28-29.

⁷ John 4:14.

⁸ John 6:35.

⁹ John 8:12.

¹⁰ John 15:4-5.

¹¹ John 10:10.

¹² Acts 9:1-9.