



Ellen Robison  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
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Three weeks ago tomorrow, a good friend of mine received a phone call just before 6:00 a.m. that the church she pastors was on fire. When she arrived at the building, police told her that vandals had broken in through the back door and targeted her office and the office of the church secretary. As you can imagine, there was smoke and water damage throughout the entire church, including their beautiful sanctuary, but because the fire was set in her office, the fire marshal declared it a total loss. All of her books and papers, her robes, her computer, her family pictures and personal mementoes, all gone. She lost everything. The next day she came by the church here to borrow one of my robes and some books to prepare for that Sunday's sermon. As we talked about things like insurance coverage and the devastation of the congregation, I finally asked, "How are *you* doing?" She began to tear up and told me the only time she had cried in the last 24 hours was when the outpouring of kindness from the community surrounding the church had simply overwhelmed her. From food to office space to donations of money, the offerings had been tremendous. Through her tears she said, "Ellen, God has been so good to us through all of this." I shook my head in amazement at her faith and remembered Paul's words from today's letter, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

Who would have guessed three years ago when the international lectionary committee selected the Scripture for today that Paul's words of "loss and gain" would be in every headline and on the lips of every person? How could Paul have known that you and I would be anxiously sitting in gas station lines and riding the nailbiting roller coaster of bank buyouts and mergers? Who would have predicted that economic markets around the world would be slipping and that nearly 750,000 people in this country would have lost their jobs in just the last year? Whether divine providence or an uncanny coincidence, the words Paul wrote to the church at Philippi are timelessly powerful for today.

He hooks us in by first appealing to our sense of accomplishment. In typical Paul fashion, he boasts, "If anyone else thinks they have a reason to be confident about their achievements, I have even more." He describes his elite family tree and his impeccable work record. He reminds us that he holds an executive position in the temple and his zealous activism in the community is without equal. You'd think he was running for political office! But we can relate, can't we? Aren't you and I grateful for all the privileges we enjoy and the credentials we've accumulated? After all, we, too, were born into good families, educated at some of the finest schools, worked our way up through the company and certainly do our part in supporting the church and our favorite charities. Paul has us right where he wants us. But then he drops a bombshell, "Whatever I had counted as my advantage (position, power, wealth, you name it) I now count it as loss in comparison to knowing Christ Jesus.

This is not an easy thing for Paul to say. It can't be. He's built a life for himself on his family's good name and his good works. And yet, at some point, perhaps lying on that Damascus road, he realizes there is only one thing in this life of true value, one relationship he desires above all others, one solid foundation in a world of shifting sand. "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 refuse (waste), in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.” For Paul, to “gain” Christ and be found in him means he has found the center of his life. And that center will hold. All the old networks he had built, the authorities he had relied on, all the institutions he had trusted have fallen away and he has chosen to stake his life on the truth of Jesus. Could you and I do that? Are we being asked to?

I was with a study group this week that is examining the lives of famous spiritual thinkers. We read again the story you’ve heard about the night Martin Luther King Jr. was sitting in his home when he received a phone call. The man on the other end threatened to blow up his home and kill everyone in it. King shakily hung up the phone and said, “I sat at that kitchen table thinking about my little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep...And I got to the point that I couldn’t take it anymore. I was weak. And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself.” He prayed for strength and courage and heard a voice saying, “Stand up for truth, Martin. Stand up for justice. And I promise never to leave you, no never alone.”

I asked the study group, “When did in your life your faith become real to you?” I’m not talking about the “parents drag me here, I like to do good works, I’ll see you at Christmas and Easter” kind of faith, but the kind of faith where the rubber meets the road. The kind of faith that sustains you when all else has failed. For many in the group, it was during a time of crisis: The impending death of a father, the loss of a 20-year marriage or the confirmation of a frightening diagnosis. At that moment, they said the house of cards they had built all came shattering down. All the accounts in the bank, all the promotions at the office meant absolutely nothing. All that mattered were the words they heard Jesus saying, “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. For lo, I am with you always, even unto the ends of the earth.”

Perhaps the biggest loss we’ve experienced in the last few weeks has also been our greatest gain. For you see, we’ve been suffering from a loss of confidence. A loss of confidence in the things we have come to rely on. Things like an unlimited amount of gas, or the indestructibility of the economy. We’ve placed our faith in the achievements of our own hands and believed that if we work hard enough and long enough and smart enough, we’ll be healthy, wealthy and wise. Poet W.H. Auden calls it “watching our illusions die,” when things we thought we could count on fall through the cracks.

Paul’s right. It’s always been our choice, hasn’t it, our decision as to where and in whom we will place our trust. Time and again, you and I have experienced that all the things we thought would save us, those we believed could give us what we need, would take care of us, cannot do so. People with healthy bank accounts still succumb to cancer. Children with all the privileges of quality private education still get addicted to drugs. And people who obey the law, attend church regularly and give generously to charities still get killed by drunken drivers. You see, our trusting doesn’t depend on how good we are at trusting, but on the knowledge that the one in whom we place our trust is faithful and will provide. The Psalmist writes, “But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, You are my God. My times are in your hands.” Maybe our loss of confidence in the things of the world that are here today and gone tomorrow means we have, in the end,

gained Christ. And even though in this lifetime, we may share in his sufferings we will also know the power of his resurrection in the promise of eternal life.

A few weeks ago, Dr. Howell told you about the accidental death of a 23-year-old man named Wade, whose parents are both ministers here in North Carolina. This week, I was given a copy of a letter written by Wade's mother to the church she serves.

This heartbroken mother writes, "The truth is I cannot begin to find words to describe the pain and misery that has invaded our lives and grips our heart and soul. We cannot even conceive of life in a world without Wade and the truth is, we don't want to. Just when we feel we might have regained a bit of stability, reality breaks through and grief rushes over us with a new vengeance to knock us off our feet again. But there is yet another truth – an even more important truth. Yes, our hearts are shattered and yes, even our bodies feel that they have been pummeled and bruised, but our faith is strong and sure. I have staked my life on the promise of the resurrection and the truth of the Gospel, but never has the assurance of my faith been as important or as strong as it is right now. The truth is that we are absolutely certain that Wade is with the Lord Jesus Christ through the power of Christ crucified and raised from the tomb. We know that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ. We know that death has no lasting victory and that by God's grace we will all be together again in God's time."

The grass withers, the flowers fade, the economy stumbles, but the word of God endures forever. It is the paradox of Autumn, isn't it? What appears to be a season of loss – the leaves dying and falling from the tree and the days growing shorter – is actually the season when the seeds are scattered on the ground that will bring forth new growth in the Spring. Some things must die in order for new life to begin. Some things we must let go of if we are to grow in our life in Christ. What appears on the surface as loss is actually the sowing of a new harvest.

As we join with others around the world who come to this table today, I can't help but imagine the emotions in the room at that last gathering of Jesus' disciples. Much like us this week, there was probably some anxiety, a little fear and a growing uncertainty about what the future would hold. He tells them things are about to change and the world as they know it will never be the same. He breaks some bread and pours some wine, telling them that it is his body and blood, broken and spilled for the forgiveness of their sins. In the dark days ahead, they will see Jesus arrested and tortured. He will suffer great pain and humiliation, and finally they will watch him die on a wooden cross like a common criminal. It appears to be the end of the world. All has been lost. But you and I know it is only the beginning – the beginning of something new. What was once dead has been made alive. And in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we, too, have been given new life. Like Paul, we have the chance to forget what lies behind, all that we had counted as gain, and press on toward what lies ahead, finding our true life in Christ. There will be more days of uncertainty ahead, but we live as a people of hope, remembering that the love of God endures forever, steadfast, unchanging, everlasting. Thanks be to God. Amen.