

Matthew 21:33-46
Philippians 3:4b-14 (10-11)

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
October 5, 2008, World Communion

Growing in Knowing Christ

One of the things I really like about Paul is, deep down, he is just like we are. He has the same faults, fears, doubts, and problems; and yet he works through all of them to serve God and to bring honor and glory to God.

Paul always packs so much into his writing. Today we read verses 4b to 14, but we will focus on verse 10 into verse 11. In verse 10 Paul writes about knowing Christ Jesus. To know Christ, for Paul and for us, is a most crucial matter which we will attempt to unpack. Verse 10 explains it best in four areas.

First is knowing Christ through the power of Christ's Resurrection. Paul talks about now. To know Christ is to experience His Resurrection now, in the present. When we repent and make a faith commitment to Christ, we are united with Christ and become one with Him. We come to know Christ in whom we now live.

Suffering, death, and Resurrection each tell the story of Jesus' life. But knowing Christ, as we are privileged to do, is not knowing His suffering, death, and Resurrection as episodes in the Gospel. Instead, it is knowing the dimensions of Christ's life as present and active forces in our lives. It is not by chance Paul begins with "the power of His Resurrection." Paul wants to convince us of Christ's Resurrection and wants us to rise to the new life of God's new creation before we can learn the secret of Christ's suffering and be conformed to His death.

We can know the power of Christ's Resurrection. We find a hint of this power in the story of Artur Schnabel, a famous pianist, who even at age 80 reached greater heights than he had known in his long career as an artist. In an interview, Mr. Schnabel was asked how, after all the years of perfection, he still kept his interpretations fresh and inspiring. Schnabel answered, "Every day I am a new man and every occasion is a new moment for me. When I play, it is no longer I, but a secret power takes over." If this is true of a great artist, as it certainly is, it should be even more so for a Christian who knows the power of Christ's Resurrection.

Second is knowing Christ through the fellowship of Christ's suffering. It is a harsh, difficult, demanding, but essential truth, we do not know Christ completely until we know Him in the fellowship of His suffering. The fellowship of suffering has special meaning for our life of prayer. Accepting the fact we are raised to newness of life with Christ, we celebrate this liberating power of the Resurrection through praise and thanksgiving. To our prayers of rejoicing gratitude, we also link prayers of intercession for all those who suffer, who have not experienced wholeness through forgiveness and healing. Intercession is a different work. Our task is to cultivate awareness and become so sensitive to the suffering of others that in prayer, and to the degree possible in our actions, we take upon ourselves their suffering.

Prayer, especially intercession, is an expression of our greatest love. Instead of keeping pain away from us, loving prayer leads us into the suffering of God and of others. The deeper our love of God, the deeper our love of

others. The deeper our love, the more we will suffer. The more we suffer, the more we will pray.

Our suffering and the suffering of others are embraced by our compassionate Christ. In a way we may never fully understand, our intercession, through identifying with suffering, becomes a channel of Christ's liberating power.

Third is knowing Christ through being conformed to His death. This is another recurring theme for Paul. Paul means the Christian is to die to the old order, must pass through death to life eternal, must give his or her life to a process of letting the old life die so the new life can be born.

There is a sense in which knowing Christ in the power of His Resurrection and being conformed to His death are one dynamic process. In Christ's death and Resurrection the old humanity comes to an end and new humanity begins. Paul indicates he must consider himself dead to sin and alive to God. He must allow the Spirit to renew his inner nature and transform himself stage by stage into the likeness of Christ.

Fourth is knowing Christ through His Resurrection from the dead. Paul does not stop with what really matters in this life. Knowing Christ means life goes on beyond death. An actual experience which becomes a powerful parable is our best commentary on this truth. Mr. Harry Pritchett, Jr. tells this story.

Once upon a time an eight-year-old boy named Philip lived near Mr. Pritchett. Philip was born a mongoloid. He was a pleasant child – happy, it

seemed, but increasingly aware of the difference between himself and other children. Philip went to Sunday School. His Sunday School teacher was also a friend of Mr. Pritchett. The teacher taught the third grade Sunday School class at a Methodist church. Philip was in his class, as well as nine other eight-year-old boys and girls.

The Sunday School teacher was very creative. As happens with eight-year-olds, Philip, with his differences, was not readily accepted as a member of this third grade Sunday School class. But the teacher was good and facilitated a good group with these eight-year-olds. They learned; they laughed; and they played together; and they really cared about each other – even though they would not have admitted it out loud very often. But the teacher could see it and knew it. He also knew that Philip was not really a part of the group of children. Philip, of course, did not choose nor did he want to be different. He just was.

The Sunday School teacher had a wonderful idea for his class for the Sunday after Easter. You know those large egg-shaped containers in which are packaged panty hose. The teacher had collected ten of these eggs to use that Sunday. The children loved it when he brought the eggs into the room. Each child was to get a great big egg. It was a beautiful spring day, and the children were asked to go outside on the church property and find a symbol for new life, put it in the egg, and bring it back to the classroom. The eggs would be collected, mixed up, and then they would open them and share their new life symbols one by one.

What a wonderful but confusing and wild time! They ran all around, gathered their symbols, and returned to the classroom. They put all the eggs together. Then the teacher began to open them while the children stood around the table watching. One by one the eggs were opened revealing a flower, a little butterfly, and similar items. One contained a rock. Some children laughed and asked how a rock is supposed to be new life. But the smart little boy whose egg contained the rock said, “That’s mine. And I knew all of you would get flowers and buds and leaves and butterflies and stuff like that. So I got a rock because I wanted to be different. And for me, that’s new life.”

The teacher opened the next one, and there was nothing there. The other children, as eight-year-olds will, said, “That’s not fair! – that’s stupid – somebody did not do it right.” About that time, the teacher felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down and Philip was standing beside him.

“It’s mine,” Philip said. “It’s mine,” and the children said, “You don’t ever do things right, Philip. There’s nothing there.” Philip replied, “I did so do it. I did do it. It’s empty – the tomb is empty!” The class was silent, a very full silence. And for you people do who do not believe in miracles, I want to tell you a miracle happened that day. From that time on, it was different. Philip suddenly became part of that group of eight-year-old children. They took him in. He entered. He was set free from the tomb of his differentness.

Philip died not too long after that. His family had known since the time he was born he would not live a full life span. Many other things had been wrong with his tiny little body. And so, with an infection which most

normal children could have quickly shrugged off, Philip died. The mystery simply enveloped him completely.

Philip was buried from that church. And on that day, at that funeral, nine eight-year-olds marched right up to the front of the church, not with flowers to cover the stark reality of death. Nine 8-year-olds, with their Sunday School teacher, marched right up and laid on the altar an empty egg – an empty, old discarded holder of panty-hose.

Paul's message for us is clear. The Christian life is a journey, a process of growth in which we seek to grab hold of the fullness of that which is given to us. We are Christians. Paul suggests we become what we are. As we begin where we are, we claim boldly and confidently that Christ has made us new creatures but confess humbly we have not yet become in fullness what Christ wants us to be.

Acknowledging who and where we are is necessary at every step along the way to the prize of the high calling of God. Paul suggests every day we try to leave the past behind and move forward. Christians, drawn by the power of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ are uniquely equipped to leave the past behind. That is not easy to do.

Some of the dimensions of our past which continue to drag us back, weigh us down, and make our movements stumbly at best, may be our sense of failure, or our guilt over past sin, or our pain from past hurts, or others. This inability to leave the past behind seems to contradict everything we confess about the healing, forgiving, redeeming power of God.

Paul suggests one of our goals for the future may be to focus on our lives in the here and now and to direct our energies in living to the fullest the life Christ gives us today. Part of that energy comes from God's divine purpose for our lives.

In Philippians, Christ's Resurrection is seen as the source of power in the lives of believers. Morna Hooker, in the New Interpreter's Bible, shares that those who are in Christ share His faith, His righteousness, and His Resurrection, but only, only if they are prepared to share also in His sufferings. This is an experience which is begun already for Paul and the Philippians. Christians are required to be ready to become like Christ in His death. Being in Christ means following His example. Being conformed to Christ's death is an ongoing process in the life of the believer, but attaining the Resurrection from the dead clearly lies in the future. It is the power of Christ's Resurrection which is at work in Paul's life, even in the midst of suffering, and which provides the assurance of his own future resurrection.

Paul discovered loving people is more important than living according to a set of rules. It is easy to be so caught up in church activities and good works that we forget God is worshiped and served in the ways we relate to others and in the ways we live our everyday lives. It is possible to be so busy striving after what we are sure is right that we sometimes miss more important needs. Paul insists a Christian endeavor to become what he or she already is.

On this World Communion Sunday and every day after, let us each in our own God-given way use the power of Christ's death on the Cross for all our

sakes and His Resurrection to pursue Paul's design of living the pain and suffering of others as we pray for others here and around the world and live a more Christ-like life through our prayers. As we do this, we may find ourselves loving and forgiving others as God loves and forgives us. We may also find ourselves growing in knowing Christ. May we reach out to others through prayer, love, and forgiveness as we seek to know Christ and to become more Christ-like in our lives. Amen.