

Nothing Is Important--Very Important!

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Reading:†John 15: 1-7 & Philippians 3: 1-11

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Just how far do you want to go with this thing? Imagine your retirement dinner, after the toasts and roasts are done, you stand, you clear your throat, and say: "Whatever credit I have earned here at the company - I have come to see it in the loss column of my life, because of Christ. I mean, everything is loss compared to the wealth of knowing Christ. For his sake, I regard all my achievements here at the firm, my education at good schools, my family's standing in this community... all of it I come to think of as garbage, that I may gain Christ." †And you sit down. The silence thunders. No one understands, no one at all.

Just how far do you want to go with this Christ following? Paul's affirmation seems hardly the word to build up the church--in an age when already so many don't buy what the church is selling. Future bliss? This does not concern them. Imaginary consolations? For the gullible. Reminders to behave? "When I became a man, I put away childish things." Sing praise to God and get fired with emotion? Corny! Tough customers, these post-Christians. Do you think they'll sit still for Paul, telling them that pedigree and Ph.D. are trash compared to Christ?

It all depends. Where two common conditions persist, Paul's muscular experience of life in Christ will not get a hearing. The first condition pertains to the church as it is, to you who are the example to the world of what Christianity looks like. If the outsider meets in you a person whose believing is neatly compartmentalized into religious and non-religious activities; if saying your prayers and going to church are the only ways Christ appears in your movie--then there will be no second interview on this subject. If loving God first, even more than your family, mostly means that you do your religious duties even though the family doesn't go along, then you are not ready to present a convincing case for Christ to the outsider. There is something more still to be written on your heart. This is one condition which renders Paul's expression of faith incomprehensible. Call it "Fitting Faith In." You are probably far beyond this, but many church people are not. As we say, Christian life has more.

The second condition which will render Paul's account of Christ un-understandable, is that an individual continually avoid confronting her existence. You know, it's only been one hundred years since electricity severed us Americans from the daily powers of darkness. Only one hundred years since

our ears became constantly occupied with noise - the hive of the city droning in the distance, the cars going by, your T.V., the refrigerator clicking on, the computer fan always. Only one hundred years since silence absolute never more descends, nor darkness, without your permission. Today, to avoid your self, you no longer need to get drunk. The whole society colludes in making it thoroughly respectable to pass life through with no proper silence or shadow, taking no measure of the seriousness of our life and its death.

When death or darkness drop unbidden around an American life, it outrages our expectations. But for some, of course, it wakes them up--in that unmasked silence of the night's middle. Here they meet... Nothing. Holy Nothing. Then the condition of spiritual stupor, common to our race, can be broken. Before they are lulled again to sleep, will they encounter a credible Christianity, like that of Paul? Or will another rugged way in the wilderness present itself?

Here is the way for the wakeful in Christ--the "I am the Way"- the way of the Cross. To all who labor and are heavily burdened, to any who suffer, Christianity offers... Nothing. Christian faith makes Nothing... possible. When you see this, in the dark, you know it is the gift without parallel. Nothing... is possible! You step out into the thin ether of what seemed forbidding space and floorless dark, where achievements are ash and possessions past and beloveds of every kind lie sleeping, unavailable, gone. You step out knowing Nothing, knowing not whether here you can breathe at all, or stand, or whether you will die. But you trust in the Lord, and you step out into Nothing-on-Earth. And you find with each new breath and each step in this new Space that Nothing is possible.

This is heaven on earth. Where you know - if only now and then, still now and then--that if the whole world be taken from you, you stand. You are all right, by God - in whom you trust. And this was the end of God all along, you see--not to pull you away from the world to fit in odd religious duties, but to pull the world away from you, like an ill-fitting robe, that you might see who you are without its folds and fading colors to fool you. That you might see Christ abiding, resplendent, eternal within you, and you in him. Then say you in full voice, "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." Then, again with brother Paul: "I come knowing Nothing - except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (1 Cor 2.2) Then back to the tragedy and the comedy of our life you return, sure that "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work his good will"--breathing Holy Spirit breath by breath, instant by instant glad in the Giver of Breath, knowing that here Nothing is important--very, very important.

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