

Sorting Gold from the Garbage

Philippians 3:7-14 Crossroads CC

Exodus 20:1-20 Oct. 5, 2014 World Communion

Once I read about a retired athlete who had accumulated many trophies of his triumphs in high school, college, and professional sports. He was housecleaning in his den and put all his prize trophies aside in a garbage bag so he could remodel his trophy shelves. His daughter assumed that they were trash and hauled them out with the other trash. The family had to sort through the landfill to find them. They looked for the gold of the past in the garbage of present.

Anybody who has cleaned house or packed to move knows how hard it is decide on what to keep and what to pitch. Will we use this again? Will it have sentimental value? Do we have space for it? Will we wear this again, or should we send it to the rummage sale or resale shop?

An even more dramatic story happened in China during the Communist revolution. Christian missionaries were ordered to leave the country, and all they could take with them was 200 pounds. So they packed their clothing and personal items, and then filled the remaining weight with books and their old typewriter. The soldiers came to escort them to the ship. "You do know," the soldier said, "that the 200 pounds includes your children." Funny how quickly those books and typewriter were unpacked!

Story number three. Once there was a village blacksmith short, stocky and shy, who secretly loved the tallest girl in town. He finally asked her to marry him, and she accepted. He hopped up on an anvil to kiss her, then asked to talk a walk. A few blocks later, he asked, "could I kiss you again?" "No, not in public," she said. "Then I'm putting down this anvil, it is getting heavy to carry around."

All these stories involved people making decisions about what was and wasn't important to them. Last week, we

heard Paul talking to the Philippians about Christ's humility, how Christ laid aside the glory and joy if heaven to come and walk with us and to die for us, even death on a cross. Jesus gave up so much so that we would have the joy of life in Christ, both on this earth and in Glory to come.

Today Paul changes the focus and tells how he personally gave up power and prestige, rank and authority, and took up a life of being treated like an outlaw, all for the sake of Christ. Was it worth it to give up everything for Christ? For Paul, the answer was a resounding yes! For him, that good life, his comfortable life, his education, status righteousness by law, was now garbage to him—he even compared it to dung, or manure. It was so much garbage that had to be dug through to find the gold of God's love. Paul discovered that there were 2 kinds of righteousness -- self-righteousness and God-given righteousness; there were 2 kinds of life--life towards death, and finding the death to self that leads to new life. He compared his new life in faith to running a race—not perfect, but going ahead; not arrived, but hanging in there, not knowing he possesses Christ, but knowing Christ possesses him. Paul knows that faith was keeping on step by step, reaching, growing, coping with pressures to stop and be defeated. He could endure sorting through the garbage to get the goal.

Paul said all that to remind us that no matter what we give up for our faith, for Jesus Christ, it's worth it—not only worth it, but the difference is way beyond comparison—garbage vs. gold. How many tithers have said, it's worth it. I gain so much more than I give. How many people go to work camps or to mission projects or Habitat for Humanity builds, or have tutored poor children, and say how much more they received than what they gave. What we lose when we give ourselves to Christ can't be compared to the joy and life that we receive.

Our first scripture reading was about the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus. This takes us back to the years that the Hebrew children were wandering in the desert, an open, arid place between the slavery they once knew in Egypt and the land that God had promised them but always seemed so far away. They were doing more than wandering; they were becoming a people. Once they were no people, now they were God's people—well, at least some of the time. The laws of Egypt no longer applied. But back at the time that God had called Moses at the burning bush, God promised to meet them again at that mountain, to give them the gift of the law. The Ten Commandments became the summary and the epitome of a much larger law code, and we still treasure them today. The first four deal with our duty to God; to worship God and God only; to avoid worshiping idols; to keep the Sabbath. The next six are with how we deal with other people—honoring our parents; not lying; not killing; not stealing; not coveting. The Ten Commandments were not only laws to keep the people from doing wrong, they offered a way of life that would give blessings to them as they followed them.

Andrew King wrote a marvelous poem about them.

THE TEN WORDS

(Exodus 20: 1-21)

This is a moment of new creation:

blast of a trumpet and fire and smoke

and the people gathered at the foot of a mountain

and Moses on the summit, receiving words:

words that are beacons, words that cast shadow,

words that are firebrands struck from stone,

words that are trumpet, calling to silence,

words that will echo through ages to come,

words that are the beating heart of a covenant,

words of requirement, words that are gift,

words that are bones in the body of a people,
words that are blood flowing into their veins,
words that are power, spoken to weakness,
words that are freedom because they are fence,
words that challenge us, words that summon us,
words that are song for a life-long dance,
words that are dwelling place, words of foundation,
words that are law, given in grace,
words that are signposts, words that are journey,
words that are a pathway pointing to peace.

This is a moment of new creation:

blast of a trumpet and fire and smoke

and we are the people at the foot of a mountain

and we have these words, and our heart for their home.ⁱ

Both the words of Paul, describing how all that he used to value was garbage compared to the future that he saw with Christ Jesus, and the Ten Commandments, help point us toward God. They bring us hope. They give us purpose.

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day when Christians of many churches around the world look beyond the differences that divide us—differences of doctrine, biblical interpretation, church organization, tradition, old wounds from past battles, race, language, culture, nationality--and make a common witness that here, right here, what unites us is more important than what divides us. It isn't fair or right to say that what separates Christians is garbage that can easily be disposed of. We have to take the divisions in the body of Christ seriously, and learn to listen to one another in all our differences. But here at this table today we can be prophetic—we can make a faith claim. This isn't our table, it's Christ's. And here we find strength, hope, and new life, just like the rest of God's children. When I come to the Lord's Table on World Communion Sunday, my thoughts go in different ways. Sometimes I feel judged. There are so many

people out there who come to this table from abject poverty, whose whole income per day is less than our pocket change—this bread reminds me that they're starving and that I can do something about it; that I can work for economic justice. Sometimes I feel good, to remember Christians I've met from different churches, different countries, and I feel good that we're breaking bread together. Sometimes I feel challenged, because I realize that people who think differently, who act differently, who I may dislike, are just as welcome to be at the Lord's Table as I am. But most of all, I feel blessed—very, very blessed to know that this is Christ's table, and Christ is our host, welcoming us to share in the joy that comes from his presence. It may be a tiny piece of bread, a tiny cup of juice, but even so, it's a feast of love, a banquet of peace, a gift of grace. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ Andrew King, © Copyright © 2014 from "A Poetic Kind of Place: Andrew King's New Weblog (<http://earth2earth.wordpress.com>)