

St. Alban's Westwood  
The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
April 7, 2019  
The Rev. Warner R. Traynham

Philippians 3:8 "Indeed, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him."

A couple of Sunday's ago a portion of Los Angeles was tied up by the LA Marathon. Depending on where you live some of you may have had to plot a course, based on the published route, in order to get to church or anywhere on that Sunday morning. The course has been changed, but some years ago, it ran right by St. John's, my former parish and for years, after the early service on that day, I, and many of my parishioners, could be found standing on the sidewalk outside of church, watching the throng of marathoners pour by.

A couple of my parishioners regularly ran in the Marathon. I remember trying to reach one of them at his office on the following Monday only to be told that he wasn't in. As I remember, the secretary I spoke to said he wasn't expected that day or the next and that he was probably home in a semi comatose condition, trying to recover. The people who run in the marathon have to prepare for it. They give up sitting in front of the TV or their computer and have to get out and train their bodies. They have to watch what they eat. For the time of preparation, they revise their lives in order to compete.

The last time I ran competitively was in Junior High School so I don't expect to run in the marathon. It is a different world, but there is something admirable about people training and sacrificing in order to run. There is a discipline and a vision about it. All life is not given over to earning a living and enjoying the gains, but to striving, to stretching oneself. To reaching beyond the everyday. That is what is exciting about it.

The couch potato is the very opposite of a long distance runner. He or she is someone whose creature comforts come first. The couch potato and the marathoner live in two different worlds. One is contained, the other is open ended and risky.

The contained, ordered, managed world is the one most of us live in. St. Paul was a spiritual long distance runner, a spiritual marathoner. That is why his words sound so extreme, so foreign. "Indeed, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord."

Can we say that? Yet his words echo two of the parables of Jesus. The kingdom, Jesus says, is like a man who discovered a treasure in a field and covered it up and went and sold all that he had and bought that field. Or again, the kingdom is like a pearl of great value which a merchant found and then sold all that he had and bought it. Jesus too is a long distance runner.

When the apostle Paul penned these words to the church in Philippi, he was a prisoner of the empire on his way, as it turned out, to death in Rome...for the sake of Christ. So he wasn't just whistling "Dixie". He knew what he was talking about when he said he suffered the loss of all things, for his Lord.

At the beginning of this passage, read for our second lesson, Paul in this Epistle speaks specifically about what he has given up. That is his claim to be somebody. If he mocks the accomplishments of the flesh, it is not because he did not have them, but because he did and he knows what they are worth compared to knowing Christ.

He recites his famous pedigree. "Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" This, along with his life, Paul is giving up for the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord."

We all live in two worlds, ... or rather there are two worlds available to us. That is what Jesus is saying in his parables about the kingdom. There is the familiar world where the rules are laid down and the liabilities are limited and everybody knows where they are and how far they can go, ...and then there is the kingdom of God, where you find out the possibilities as you go along and nobody knows how far they will find themselves going, except that they know they are with Christ and go with him.

The first world is the world Paul used to belong to, and of which his pedigree made him an outstanding member. The second is the world he blundered into on the road to Damascus. What he tells us is that there is no comparison between these two worlds. In one, you are the result of your own effort and limited by that fact. In the other you are the result of faith in Jesus Christ and there is no limit to what you may become.

The first world may be symbolized by the lawyer's question to Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" What is the limit to the requirement of neighborliness? Just how much do I have to do to be righteous, to get by?

The second world is symbolized by Jesus' answer in the parable of the Good Samaritan, when he tells the lawyer, not who his neighbor is, but what it is to be neighborly, which turns out to mean that the demand is open ended.

Or again, the first world is symbolized by Peter's question. "How many times must I forgive? Seven times?" The second is symbolized by Jesus' answer, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven", ...that is without limit.

Have you ever stared full at the sun? I don't recommend it, but some of you may have tried it. When you look away at something else, what do you see? Still the sun...right? Momentarily you have lost sight of everything, so overwhelming is the brilliance of the sun. That, says Jesus is what the kingdom is like. That says Paul is what knowing Christ Jesus is like.

Plato, the greek philosopher, centuries ago, told a parable of people raised deep in the darkness of a cave who wandered into the light. It was painful at first and they turned away. But those who persisted and came out of the cave, discovered a world so overwhelming in its beauty and brightness that when they returned to the cave, they wanted everybody to come out. Those who had remained and heard their claims for this other world, thought they were mad and imprisoned them.

Imagine living all your life in a dark cave and then one day wandering to its mouth and seeing beyond, a sunlit world full of variety and wonder, much richer, but also much more disorienting, than anything you have known before. The world of the cave, the familiar world with its order and its darkness and its rules, would be missed, felt as a loss, ...but soon, as a loss to be embraced. A loss that seems a small price to pay for such a brave new world.

I lived in a little limited world, says Paul, where I knew where everything was and what I was expected to do. Some were privileged in this world and some were not, but everything fit after some fashion. Then after a while, people turned up to question my world. They had joys beyond those I had ever imagined, but their were terrors too. At first I resisted and tried to shut them up. But the more I heard the more sense it made...not in terms of order but in terms of adventure. For them, the world was not finished and life wasn't something you colored in inside the lines. The world was still in the making. You were part of it and your life was something you drew as well as colored in. Instead of multiple choice, all the tests were essay, but once you got over the initial fright there was a liberty and a love to be found, neither of which I had ever encountered before.

One Sunday, back in the 1950's I found myself in Edinburgh, Scotland listening to a sermon by the Rev. James Stewart, the great Scottish preacher. He told a story of a medieval monk who was preaching the gospel before one of the kings of Britain. The king listened to the monk and afterward, being a very practical man, he asked, "If I convert to your religion, what will I get?" at which point the monk drew himself up to his full height, and James Stewart did as well, and rolling his r's as only the scots can, he said, "You will see wonder after wonder and every wonder true."

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Such a world requires you to check your credentials at the door. No resumes here. No righteousness of your own. No smugness. No. "I am better than you." Here only the righteousness of God is allowed. To trust in that righteousness is new life. A different life. That sun filled life makes it possible to embrace the sufferings that may come with it, confident that they are not purposeless...that enduring them is to share both in Christ's sufferings and therefore in his resurrection.

Then Paul picks up the race image, the marathon. He is not perfect, that is, God is not finished with him yet. He still has some of the course to run and if he isn't finished, either in the sense

of being complete, or of being through, then we aren't either. To enter the kingdom does not mean it is over. It means it has just begun in earnest, says Paul, but "One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

The kingdom moves forward. Creation proceeds leaving behind the old ways, the old world, the old order. It is disheartening that the church is seen by so many as the unchanging institution in a sea of change, so that when it changes, it generates resistance. Yet Jesus says, you don't put a new patch on an old garment, but on a new garment, or new wine in old wineskins, but in new wineskins. We proceed, Paul reminds us, by leaving the past and pressing on. Every runner knows the starting line must be left behind. You can't have what is new and keep the old. You must choose.

In the ancient world, the prize for the race was typically displayed behind the finish line so that the runners approaching, could see that for which they competed and be spurred on. It is something like that that Paul seems to picture.

Actually, the LA marathon may be a better image since, while there is a winner, the people I know who run it are less concerned about winning than with finishing the course and that is the issue. Those who have entered the race have already laid hold on eternal life and those who finish enter into it.

To have Christ then is not to sit down, but to run the race. Someone has said that Jesus does not want admirers, but people who will get up and follow him. Some one else said of Paul's words, "I press on," that it is a statement of how to be right in a world where nothing can ever be wholly right. As the demonstrators in the '60's used to say, "we keep on keeping on." We can because we don't have to be completely right. God is, and we belong to God. So we run the race because we want to. Because that is what the kingdom is all about.

So, says Paul, there is a world out there beyond the cave, where you belong,... another world. In a real sense you need to have tried the cave,...to have tried your own righteousness,...to have tried to fit into that ordered world first, in order to know the point and the attraction of that other world. To know what he is talking about. To come to the mouth of the cave and brave the light... to discover what has been missing in your life and for its sake to count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord."