10-7/8-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Philippians 3:4b-14 Shifting Values

A few years ago I was asked in a clergy cluster to sit down and map out a timeline of my life.

As I later reviewed my timeline it read like a classic resume for a life of faith.

Baptized as an infant, confirmed as a youth, I was the first of the fifth generation of Palmers who were members of First UMC Middletown. My Grandma Palmer took every Disciple Bible Study class offered. My Grandpa Beatty was a Presbyterian pastor. Christianity has been part of the DNA of my family for multiple generations.

I began to sing in church choirs in first grade. I was a musical missionary to Japan in junior high with an ecumenical organization. As a teenager I was active in youth group and Bible study and work camps.

When I began to attend a protestant-affiliated college I was intentionally active in chapel and sang in a local church choir and surrounded myself with other men and women of faith from a variety of church affiliations.

After hearing God’s call to ministry, I went straight from college to seminary to ordained ministry. Now in my 21st year of ministry I am in my fifth appointment.

I have been blessed with a strong faith background.

I have also been blessed with many people throughout my life who constantly remind me that whatever I gained in that background I can count as loss unless I have also gained a personal relationship with Jesus.

In my first month at seminary one of my professors suddenly looked around the room, complimented us on how smart we were, then while making eye contact with every one of us reminded us that our smarts are not what will get us into heaven. Sure, he said, we could try and run the church on our own merits. We will all have good ideas and good skills for being a pastor. But, he reminded us, sounding just like Paul, if we try and live out of our own worth rather than out of our relationship with Jesus, someday that selfish striving will catch up to us.

I have friends who keep me accountable not only in my ministry, but also to my own relationship with Jesus. One will regularly call and ask, “So how is it today with your soul?”

How is it today with *your* soul?

Or is that a question that your schedule does not allow time to ponder?

In our fast paced society, how often does the state of our souls matter less on our list of priorities than success at work, money to pay the bills, activities for our children, and scholarships for our students? We strive for the best of this world for ourselves and our families, yet how often does this striving for more occur at the risk of our relationships temporary and eternal?

At age thirty, Millard was a huge success in the eyes of the world. He had a wife and children.

He was president of his own company, a company that had just made him a millionaire. He had the right cars. He would soon have the right house. He had a cabin on a lake with two speedboats. His life was the epitome of the American dream of riches through hard work.

Yet he gave it all up. He sold the business, the boats, the cars, and the house. He gave away the profits, and started over with virtually nothing. Millard Fuller traded in his dream of $10 million for a dream of affordable, decent, low-cost housing for all.

Why? Because he had lost his relationship with God. He was not moving forward in his faith.

He and his wife, Linda, were living for their own luxury and greed rather than for the needs of the less fortunate around them. Linda described their lives by saying:

“We had most everything money could buy. But I began to realize that the more I got, the more I wanted. And I didn’t feel fulfilled as a Christian. I felt like I was living contrary to what I was reading from the Bible.” -*Worldwide Challenge* article, Oct 1987

Linda and Millard Fuller were regular churchgoers, but until that day in 1965 when they sold all they had and asked God to guide their lives, they were not faithful Christians. They had to take a drastic step to shift their values from the desires of this world to the desires of God’s Word.

Yet in so doing Millard and Linda began Habitat for Humanity International, working with local communities toward the goal of eradicating substandard housing worldwide. Habitat was their way of sharing the Gospel of Christ with others, their way of pressing on in faith, their way of bringing God’s future kingdom into the current reality of life here on earth.

At the end of each of our lives here on earth, will our successes or pedigree or leadership positions really matter? Or will we find out the hard way that what really matters are our relationships with one another and most of all with Jesus?

Before Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he truly believed what mattered in life was his pedigree and life as a faithful Jew.

Paul was circumcised at a week old like all good Jewish sons. He was a pure-blooded Hebrew who could trace his roots through the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Pharisee who obeyed the Law and sought others to keep the Law without fault. To that end he also was a persecutor of the early Christian church, believing that the followers of Jesus were perverting the Law of Moses.

Paul placed his value in his religious standing, and thought he was among the most righteous of the Jews—until he encountered the living Son of God along the road to Damascus. Only then did Paul recognize his salvation was not in his pedigree or his experience. Only then did Paul realize that his salvation was only a gift from God, offered through a relationship with the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The apostle Paul was bold enough to say to the church in Phillipi:

“Because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ as Lord, I regard all that I have had and all that I have been as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”

I like the way Eugene Peterson vividly portrays Paul’s words in *The Message:*

“The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I’m tearing up and throwing out with the trash— along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. …I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn’t want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—*God’s* righteousness.”

Paul calls his past pedigree rubbish—literally the word is dung—because none of it mattered anymore to him. The only thing that now mattered was his faith in Jesus Christ.

Only through his relationship with Jesus did Paul’s life take on eternal meaning in the future and eternal purpose in the present.

What a freeing way to live, recognizing that our salvation is only through Jesus and our future is in God’s hands!

Yet when we value our education, our status in the church, or our trappings of this life higher than we value our relationships with Jesus, then are values are misplaced, just as Paul had misplaced his value in his pedigree as a faithful Jew.

Today, Paul calls us to shift our values from this world to God’s kingdom ways.

Where the world values power—God values servanthood.

Where the world values money—God values generosity.

Where the world values position—God values sacrifice.

Where the world values pedigrees—God values our faith in Jesus.

In the Cathedral of Milan there are three huge gates that lead into the Cathedral with beautiful inscriptions. Over one gate there is an inscription in marble under a beautiful flower bouquet that says, "The things that please are temporary." Over the second gate, there is a cross with this inscription: "The things that disturb us are temporary." However, over the central gate, there is a big inscription saying, "Eternal are the important ones."

--Source Unknown. Sermonillustrations.com

If you knew tomorrow would be your last day in this world, would you shift your values? If you had only 24 hours left to live, would you try to make up for lost time with family and friends? Would you try to make amends for wrongs you have committed? Would you try to spend time in prayer to beg your way into heaven? Would you try to “cram for finals,” so to speak, to improve your religious standing before God?

--taken from John Jewell lectionarysermons.com 4-1-01

If you would change your values at the end of life, why not change them today to what is meaningful and valuable—a deep relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ?

We never know when we will take our last breath. Marge’s funeral yesterday was my 10th service of death and resurrection here since December. Last Sunday evening in Las Vegas 58 concertgoers never expected to lose their life that night to a madman. And every day men, women and even children are being forced to deal with the news that they have cancer.

I have never met anyone who regretted that they did not work enough hours. I have met men and women who regretted that they did not restore broken relationships, or lamented how often they chose work over family and friends, or were agitated on their deathbeds because their children did not share their faith in Jesus.

Patriot Patrick Henry in the last days of his life was quoted as saying:

"I have now disposed of all my property to my family. There is one thing more I wish I could give them and that is faith in Jesus Christ. If they had that and I had not given them a single shilling,

they would have been rich; and if they had not that, and I had given them all the world, they would be poor indeed."  -Patrick Henry. Sermonillustrations.com:values

Paul encourages us today not to wait until it is too late to shift our values from the things of this world to an eternal relationship with Jesus. Remember, “Eternal are the important ones.” What matters when we die is not what we own or what we have left to do but how we have responded to Jesus’ love. Only through Jesus, Paul proclaims, can we ever hope to reach that eternal prize of eternal glory.

What a prize for a life of faith—forgiveness of our sins and eternal life spent with Jesus! We can be in right relationship with God not because of anything we did but because Jesus died on the cross.

Paul shares his eternal desire with the church then and now by proclaiming:

“I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.” (10-11)

To know Christ is more than head knowledge; here it also includes knowing Christ in the heart, an intimate knowing that comes only through a relationship. To experience the power of the resurrection is not just to believe in life after death but also to believe in God’s transforming grace in this life. And to be a partner in Christ’s suffering is not something we may think about in the midst of our daily lives, yet the only way to the empty tomb is through the cross. The only way to new life is to shed the old life. The only way to share in Christ’s resurrection is to share in Christ’ suffering. Yet even there God is with us.

When we press on toward that heavenly goal and gift of eternal life very few of us will take out of the starting gate like world class runners, straining to get ahead every mile. No, we are more like the tortoise than the hare, taking our time as we press onward in this journey we call life, ever mindful that tomorrow may be our last day on earth, our last day to choose Christ, our last day to press on toward that heavenly goal.

We are called to press on as those who have been loved by Christ and those who seek to love Christ in return. We aren’t called to give up when the road is full of suffering and sorrow. We aren’t called to give up when we seem to be the slowest to understand and live out the word of God as found in the Bible. We aren’t called to give up because we feel we don’t have the right pedigree to attend this church or another church, whose expectations for faith are higher than what Christ expects of us.

All Christ expects is our love—and we love because God first loved us.

We can join with Paul when he says,

“I’m not saying I have it all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don’t get me wrong: By all means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus.”

“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

When we press on in faith, we are changing our perspective on life, our standard of living, our understanding of what is important and what is not. When we press on in faith, we are stating that the values of the past, if they were the values of this world, are no longer our values.

Now we value what God values, and we strive to live by those eternal values rather than by earthly values. When we press on in faith, we no longer judge how we live based on the expectations of this world. Our standard of living changes from keeping up with our neighbors to pleasing God through our generous stewardship of all we have and all we are. When we press on in faith, we stop trying to earn God’s love and start responding to God’s love. So we recognize that what we do will not save us; what we do is our response to our salvation. We recognize that faith is not about an easy life; faith is our anchor in the celebrations and struggles of life.

I love all of the programming we have here at church during the week. I love that we study God’s Word, pray together, serve our community, and support one another. Yet none of what we do here matters if we do not live in response to Jesus’ love for us. Not of it matters is we are not first nurturing our own personal relationships with Jesus.

Have you shifted the foundation of your values from the desires of this world to the desire for eternal life? Have you shifted your hope from what you can acquire to the One who created you, loves you and sustains you? Do you live as one who goes forth to die, and dies as one who goes forth to live, all within the context of a relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior?

If those questions challenge you, as we sing our closing song this week, as you go about your daily lives, please consider these three questions:

First and foremost, do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Have you opened your heart to believe in Jesus as your Savior and your Lord? A good life will not gain you entrance into heaven. Your pedigree is not an entrance ticket to eternal life. Only a relationship with Jesus will forgive you and free you for this life and for all eternity.

Second, do you approach life with an eternal or an earthly perspective? Do you focus more on what you have, or on what you desire, rather than on who you are, a beloved child of God? Do you focus more on the world’s temporary values than God’s eternal values?

Finally, are you living for Jesus each and every day? The Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon, in which each day we press on a little closer to the finish line of faith, eternal life in heaven.

Paul invites us to value our faith in Jesus above all else. Each day we are called to grow deeper in love with Jesus and live deeper as a follower of Jesus. May we strive to live by God’s eternal values, embraced by God’s eternal love, this day and always.

May it be so. Let us pray.