**18th Sunday after Pentecost**

**St. James Episcopal Church, Louisa**

**Rev. Dr. Jennifer L. Lazzuri**

**Year A**

**October 4, 2020**

**Perseverance and other Under-rated things**

Today is World Communion Sunday. It is not a day that the Episcopal Church produces resources for or recognizes formally, though many churches choose to recognize this day and celebrate our oneness in Christ with other protestant groups.

It takes place on the first Sunday of every October and promotes Christian unity and [ecumenical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumenical) cooperation. It focuses on an observance of the [eucharist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eucharist). The tradition was begun in 1933 by Hugh Thomson Kerr who ministered in the [Shadyside Presbyterian Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shadyside_Presbyterian_Church).

It was an attempt to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity, and to be a reminder of how each congregation is interconnected one with another.

In a sense, it is a shame that there was a need for this day - a day to deliberately try to join the Church as a whole together - for it speaks to a separateness that exists and existed. May we pause sometime throughout this day and remember and celebrate our connection with the world around us.

Today in the Epistle, Paul, who has been encouraging the church at Philippi up to this point to persevere in unity, begins in the lectionary text to warn the church at Philippi to not be boastful because of who they are “the true people of the circumcision” ( v. 3) (Which also seems fitting on this day of World Communion). He begins by stating that he has reasons for his confidence - he was of a good pedigree, the right stock, a good Jewish man and follower of the law. He had reason to feel confident in those things. But something happens (road to Emmaus) and Paul meets God and things change. It is important in our faith walk that we don’t become so confident in who we are and the way that we do things in our religious walk that we become boastful or prideful and judgmental of those around us who do things differently.

Paul met Christ on the road to Emmaus and things changed for him. That is the actual mark of meeting God - it changes us. What we think about God, ourselves and others, all change. Each of Paul's letters are about this.

The church has increasingly struggled to justify its relevance to the world around them. Churches struggle with how to “best reach people.” I would argue that the church is asking the wrong question. If the church can show that it is different - that our lives are different from the world around us - then, we may become attractive to the world. Knowing Christ should change us. It should change how we behave, how we interact with others.

After Paul encounters Christ, he shares that his confidence is the first thing that changes. Before, he had confidence in his pedigree, confidence in his willpower to keep the rules. He even had confidence in persecuting the church. But something happened. His confidence shifted. Paul's balance sheet changed. Red has become black. What was gain is now loss. What was foolishness is now foundational. New insight is gained through faithful living.

Paul is clear now. There's a different thing in which to have confidence. "There's value that surpasses all other value," and that is "knowing Christ Jesus...." (Phil 3.8)

I have joined a clergy study group that is being led by our new assistant Bishop Porter Taylor. Porter challenged us recently to “go deep”. He gently challenged us that now is not the time for little platitudes and Christian sayings - but now is a time for leaders to dig deep and show the world what it means to stand in Christs’ love. This resonated with me.

Beginning at a new church is hard. Beginning ministry in a church in the midst of a pandemic is exceedingly difficult. It is difficult to minister to people amidst fear of disease, and in the midst of a politically charged atmosphere.

So I come, with a little fear and trepidation; and I also come to you in confidence.

Paul states boldly that he “***wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection***” … and not that he has already obtained this, but he presses on to make it his own, ***because Christ has made me his own***”.

Christ has made me his own. And so I stand before in the confidence of who Christ is.

Churches thrive when they exist as a treasure trove of God's revelations in the world for the world.

Church is a gathering place for those of us who can't contain the good news of God by ourselves. We tend to forget that good news and why we are here.

Church is that place of confirmation for the world weary, who hope in God.

Church is where we are being made seasoned spiritual guides as we ourselves journey on to spiritual maturity. That's where the power is. Having confidence in God.

 Paul found something in Jesus that emboldened him to forfeit his previously normal life. Paul's faith is made up of things forfeited. He said, "I've suffered loss...in order that I may gain Christ." (Phil. 3.8) What did he forfeit?

 He forfeited title and reputation, professional friends and community standing. Steady income and a warm bed most nights. But, more importantly, he forfeited designing his own life. He gave up careerism for calling. He gave up the fantasy of independence for the truth of interdependence. He allowed what was in his head about Christ to enter his blood stream, his calendar and his checkbook. He took on Jesus' spirituality of simplicity.

I am coming to your as your new priest, warts and all - not as a perfect human, but as a priest called to “be a pastor to all whom you are called to serve, laboring together with them and with my fellow ministers to build up the family of God.” *(ordination vows -BCP)*

I come to serve you and to lead you, and to love you. I promised to *endeavor to minister the Word of God and the Sacraments so that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received. (ordination vows-BCP)*

Paul said, "I want to know Christ." (Phil. 3.10)

He said, like John, "I must decrease and He must increase." (John 3.30) Come what may.

In Bishop Porter’s brief remarks to me this week, he challenged me and others to “go deep”. This is what the world is looking for.

People stop coming to church when they don’t see the relevancy in their lives. Young people and people beyond the church want to know that, for all our praying and singing, sitting and standing, have we gained something the world cannot give? And having gained Christ, has it made a difference?

It made a difference for Paul.

It should make a difference for us.

The world needs new Paul's and Paulette's. This is the stock and trade of Christian leadership. Witness forged in discipleship, communicated in authenticity.

What shall we do? Paul said it plainly, "...press on toward the goal...." (Phil. 3.13) Paul had a goal-oriented faith. And so must we.

That goal had three parts. Step one: "Forget what lies behind." (Phil. 3.13) Jesus has redeemed the past and bought us a future with his love. So don't get stuck in the past. You are free. "Those whom the Son has set free are free indeed." (John 8.36)

Step two: "Strain forward." (Phil. 3.13) Moving forward with Jesus takes some work. You have to confront your fears. Christianity is for the spiritually athletic. It stretches us exactly how we need to be stretched. You can trust the process.

 Step three: "...press on toward the goal of the heavenly calling." (Phil. 3.13)

Early on in many of our Christian walks we were obsessed about being good people. And I don’t know how many times people have said to me as if in defense of their lives, “I am a good person”. That may be true and I want you to be a good person - I want to be a good person - but that is not our goal. Our goal is God, not good.

Obsession with our goodness is narcissism. The only good there is, comes from pursuing God, so we press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Let us keep pressing on. Amen.