

April 7, 2019
Philippians 3:7-14
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“Profit and Loss”

Good morning! I’m guessing that most of you know that this past Monday, April 1, is also known as April Fool’s Day. Did any of you play a prank or a hoax on anyone? Anyone get pranked? This used to be one of my favorite days of the year, especially when my children were younger and more gullible. Most of my pranks had to do with food: baking muffins with a cotton ball inside, or putting a piece of paper in with the lettuce in their sandwich. For those of you who know Marilee Gilliland, when she heard that I liked pranking my kids, she pulled some wacky stuff on me.

I was nobody’s fool this year, but it did get me wondering about April Fools Day, which has a long history in America and European countries. In Scotland they hunt the gowk -- or the cuckoo -- kind of like sending campers on a snipe hunt. In England and Ireland a common prank used to be sending some to deliver an “important” letter, and then the recipient would send them on to someone else and someone else -- on a fool’s errand. In France you try to put a paper fish on someone’s back without them knowing -- kind of like a Kick Me sign. In America, it’s become a practice to run a hoax news story and then retract it the next day: although now with all the accusations of fake news, that makes it difficult to sort out. There have been several occasions when an actual story on April 1 was presumed to be a hoax. In 1946, an April 1 real warning about a tsunami was widely ignored, and 165 people in Hawaii and Alaska were killed.

It turns out the New Testament has some things to say about foolishness. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is writing to a church in conflict. One source of that conflict is church members who think they are wiser and spiritually superior to other folks. Greek culture, in

particular, put a high value on intellect and philosophy and rhetoric, and educated and wealthy folks took that opportunity to assert their spiritual superiority. Paul goes right at these folks in 1 Corinthians chapter 1: in verses 22-25 he says, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

[Slide 1] Through the past four weeks of Lent, we have been talking about Growing in Grace: what does it mean to be shaped and formed as God’s people and followers of Christ? How can we claim the grace and salvation which we are given by Jesus’ death and resurrection? [Down] Paul is also the author of the letter to the church in Philippi, which we know as the book of Philippians. He is revisiting some of the themes of his earlier letter to the Corinthians, this time in a more personal way. In Philippians 3 verses 3-6, Paul is flourishing his own Jewish credentials: A Hebrew born of Hebrews, circumcised, educated in the law, zealous in persecuting law breakers, righteous, blameless. Pretty big claims: although they are accurate, Paul is building up to some irony. He knows that he’s a fool. Not only does he know it, he’s proud of it. In verse 7 he says, “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that 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.” Rubbish is a strong word: it can be translated as “garbage,” and also as “human excrement.” I won’t say the slang for that from the pulpit, but you what I’m talking about. Not just worthless but gross. That’s what Paul has to say about his righteousness and blamelessness.

There will likely come for each one of us a time in our lives when someone treats us like rubbish -- and maybe even human excrement - - because we know Christ and are trying to act like him. This is never a good day, but it is the time when we are closest to understanding what Christ did for us by allowing himself to be beaten, mocked, and hung on a cross -- and believe me, anything we go through is still a long way from what Christ did for us. Knowing Christ confounds our notions of what is profit and what is loss, because in order to gain

Christ, we have to let go of our ego about all those things we thought made us special and superior: our education, the fact that we're smarter than almost everyone, and more righteous, too. In fact, we're practically perfect. To which Paul would say, "Rubbish. Bull excrement." It is not that we aren't valued and loved by God -- we certainly are -- but not because of our human accomplishments. We need grace because those human accomplishments are *never enough* to earn our salvation. And if our efforts are *never enough* to earn our salvation, it's just silly to brag that I fall just a little less short than other people; I got a couple inches further before I totally missed the mark. Grace is a gift we cannot accept while we are still hanging on to our high opinion of ourselves. Grace comes when we are willing to lose everything in order to know Jesus Christ as our Lord. That's a tall order. Do not believe anyone who tells you otherwise.

I hope some of you noticed how our chancel is beginning to leaf out: I hope the trees outside will hurry up and catch up. I spent some happy time this week looking for photos of trees [Slide green leaves] We have been using trees as a metaphor of spiritual growth, and I wanted to illustrate how when the roots are planted deeply and the trunk of the tree is standing strong, we can branch out and flourish. It may not surprise you to learn that mathematicians have developed algorithms to estimate how many leaves are on a tree--since it would take a long time to count them. These estimates still vary widely, but the research I did figured 30-60,000 leaves on a mature tree, with estimates as high as 200,000. That a lot of growth for a tree to support.

[Slide tree with light] Or you can look at trees the way I do, without thinking about numbers at all, but rather how the leaves look when the light is shining through them. If you agree with Alfred Joyce Kilmer that "only God can make a tree," then surely these trees didn't earn their strength, beauty or all those leaves. Trees need things to grow, but they don't create light and rainfall; those things come by the providence of God. Trees can't make the weather, they rely on whatever they are given.

[Cross tree] I did contemplate some other trees in light of the scriptures from today: I couldn't find an image of the Living Cross from Camp Mack, but here is a tree in the shape of a cross: trees

don't typically grow in this form; I don't know what forces shaped this tree, but I spent some time imagining what it would be like to live in the form of a cross. I was also intrigued by this tree [Heart Tree] because the shape of the heart is visible only because the tree has been broken. Grace is not revealed in our strength and independence; we see grace in the healing and growth which comes after suffering and loss and brokenness, when we are empty and have been filled with Christ's grace.

[Cross] But the tree image I most want to leave with you today is this one. It is, of course, not a natural tree, but a cross which was formed out of wood. Such a simple form, but it has come to represent the pairs of concepts which are at the center of our Christian faith: loss and profit, foolishness and wisdom, suffering and glory, death and life. I want to leave you with two verses from the Apostle Paul. The first from Philippians 3, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." And from 1 Corinthians 1: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." I pray that we will welcome the foolishness and the power of God as we grow in the knowledge and grace of Jesus. Amen.