

Philippians 3:1-14
John 8:21-30
“What Was, Is, and Is to Come”

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Paul and Jesus are both packing up their bags this morning and heading out for someplace else. In the case of Paul, he’s not actually heading off to someplace else. At least I don’t think he is. But he’s definitely in transition. In writing his letter to the church at Philippi, he comes off as a guy who sounds like he’s standing in his home office looking around. On a shelf over here he’s got some old trophies, most of them now covered in dust. But back in the day he was super proud of those trophies. He built the shelf just so he’d have some place to put them. On the wall behind his desk hangs 2 or 3 diplomas. His seminary diploma is the biggest, and it hangs in the center. That diploma is the one that proves he’s fit to be a preacher and to pastor a church. Finally, on his desk and scattered about on some bookcases are pictures of him standing next to or shaking hands with some notable people. There are some family shots, including one of his great-great grandfather Benjamin. He was revered in his day and many relatives say Paul reminds them of him.

Standing around and looking at all these pieces of accomplishment and memorabilia, Paul has a sudden twitch in his heart as he thinks about how hard he worked to get to where he is and what it’s all worth, as with a single brush of his arm, he sweeps all the trophies, all the diplomas, and all the pictures into a box.

For Paul, it’s an important exercise in self-examination. To ask yourself from time to time: what makes me who I am? And maybe also to ask others to give their opinion on what makes you who you are.

I read for us a passage from John’s gospel a moment ago, where Jesus is foretelling his death. Like Paul, and like anyone who is considering their own mortality, Jesus is self-examining. He’s measuring his life, the direction it has taken, and what it has stood for.

Unlike in the other gospels, where Jesus seems at times to be less sure of the purpose and direction of his own life, in John’s gospel Jesus comes off as being eagle-eyed. He’s not just focused on getting up to Jerusalem and giving his life on a cross, he seems possessed by it. Like come hell or high water, nothing is going to stand between him and death. Which explains why the Jews in John’s gospel, whom Jesus has meet along his way to Jerusalem, ask him in our passage today, “Are you on some kind of suicide mission?”

What's gotten into you? Who are you?" What must be noted, however, is that Jesus doesn't answer their question. He doesn't pull out his resume to show them his qualifications. He doesn't take his old trophies off the shelf as a way of telling them who he is. In fact, in John's gospel Jesus never points to himself. He never assumes a position of power.

What Jesus does do on more than one occasion—when he is asked to say who he is—what Jesus does do is to turn the question around. This is what he does one day after he's been doing a lot of preaching and healing, and people are coming from all over to hear what he has to say, and his popularity is growing, and he turns to his disciples and asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" And they say things like, "Well, some say you're a prophet, or maybe the ghost of John the Baptist in the flesh." And that's when Jesus hits them right between the eyes with, "Yes, but who do *you* say that I am?" Because it's easy to go around saying what other people think. That's just reporting, propaganda, and gossip. But to have to think for yourself, to be asked to put your own opinion on the line, to not take someone else's answer but to come up with your own, that's the stuff that truth is made of. "Who do you say I am," Jesus wants to know. Because Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. In one week he will be there. And it won't be hard to know what the crowds think about him on that day. With their palm branches waving, and their shouts of Hosanna, even the women and children will lay their coats down on the ground for his donkey to walk upon. They'll love him and say, we'll follow you anywhere, but when he picks up his cross and says follow me now, that's when we'll have to answer for who Jesus really is, and for who we are.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who lived in the 19th century, writes that,

Jesus never asks for admirers, worshippers, or adherents. No, he calls for disciples. In claiming to *be* the way and the truth and the life, Jesus could never have been satisfied with adherents who accepted his teaching—especially with those who in their lives ignored it or let things take their usual course. His whole life on earth, from beginning to end, was destined solely to have followers and to make admirers impossible.

He came into the world with the purpose of saving it—*of loving it back into itself*—and he was born and lived and died in lowliness. So there is absolutely nothing to admire in Jesus, unless you want to admire poverty, misery, and contempt.

The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. They always play it safe. *Though they will tell you all day long how much they prize Jesus*, in the end they will renounce nothing. They will not reconstruct their life to reflect what they so supposedly admire. Not so for the follower. No, no. The follower wants with all their strength to be what they admire.¹

This must be why Paul, in writing to the church at Philippi, must go so far as to say, “Yet whatever gains I’ve had, I now count them as loss because of Christ. For I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. To share in his sufferings and to become like him in his death, if it means I too might know what it is to be raised from the dead.”

Please understand, Paul is not suicidal. He is not suggesting—not at all—that those who love God and their religion must be willing to show it by dying for it. Nor is Paul saying that this world is crap and we’ve got to get out of here while we still can. No, no, just the opposite. He’s saying that Jesus came into this world to love the people and parts that up until now have been considered no good to be loved. And that he loved these parts of us so much that he was willing to die for them, to show the critics that some things are worth loving that much. And he’s saying that those who want to love in this way can never be just admirers of love.

In her book, “Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church,” Kenda Creasy Dean observes that despite all appearances, young people today—and it should be said old people too—are not looking to suffer. They are, however, looking for a love that is worth suffering for.

Several years ago I read John Krakauer’s book, “Into the Wild,” which tells the real life story of Chris McCandless. Chris McCandless grew up in a middle to upper class family in the D.C. suburbs. To say the least, he grew up comfortably. After graduating from college, at the age of 22, he decided he wanted not just a different life, but a new one. And so he burned up his license and social security card, changed his name, got in his used Datsun and drove it across the country as far as it would go, and when it broke down, he left it on the side of the road for someone else to come along and pick up, while he hitchhiked the rest of his way north towards the Alaskan wilderness, where he planned to start his new life. Along his way, he is befriended by an old man named Ron. (Ron doesn’t

¹ From “Bread and Wine: Readings for Easter.” Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publishing. March 2005. *Italics* my addition.

appear in the book, but he does appear in the movie version of the book). Ron takes Chris in, gives him a place to rest for a few days, takes him to the store and helps him replenish his supplies, and early one morning he drives Chris out as far as he can take him to drop him near the Canadian border.

In this one very touching scene, Ron and Chris are sitting in the cab of Ron's truck. Chris, who is still determined as ever to leave his old life behind, is just about to open the door and get out, when Ron says to him in a voice both sad and hopeful, "You know, my father was an only child, and my mother was an only child, and I'm an only child. So once I die, that will be it. That will be the end of my family. But I've been thinking, maybe I could, maybe I could adopt you. You know, I could be your grandfather." As a single tear rolls down Ron's cheek, Chris looks at him and says, "Can we talk about this later?" But of course later never comes.

On the other hand, last night, close to 70 of us I would say, got together for dinner at Wright's Chicken Farm. I was late in getting there and only my daughter Lillian was able to go with me. Walking into this giant room that was more like a banquet hall, the place was packed and I said to Lillian, "How are we ever going to find our group?" When Lillian, pointing off into the distance said, "There they are! I see Mr. Jeff's head and Mr. Jay's beard." Now Jeff, I don't think she meant that your head is big. I think she meant only that you are tall. Jay, I think she meant your beard is big.

So we followed Jeff's head and Jay's beard to find our group. To be honest, both Lillian and I were feeling pretty tired from the day. It had been a long one for both of us, and I know it had been an even longer one for many of you. Working, running after your kids, going to funerals, grieving, comforting your friends. Lillian and I sat down at a table beside Phil and Ginny, who are six times Lillian's age and whom she loves very much. The table was filled with bowls of chicken and pasta and rolls. We had a great time.

I don't know why I tell you this story except that I want you to know, if you're looking for family today. If you're in search of a love worth keeping, we could do no better than to follow one another to the table, where the food is plenty and free, and the company is to die for. Amen.

