

KEEP ON GROWING

Today is World Communion Sunday within the church's liturgical year. As far back as I can remember, this special Sunday is one of my favorite times of the year. On this particular Sunday, more Christians will come to the Table and commune with the Lord and with one another in the one body of Christ than at any other time during the year. We rejoice at this visible expression of our unity with others in and through Christ.

In his book, *The Cup of Wonder*, Presbyterian minister Lloyd John Ogilvie shares this personal experience. He writes: This past week I had a very, very busy day. From early morning it was filled with challenges, crises, and opportunities. I was late for an appointment. I ran out of my office and was about to get into my car across the street when my eye caught the sign announcing this communion service. The sign now completed reads: "Christ Is for the World – Lloyd John Ogilvie." That morning it was still only partially complete and it said: "Christ is for... Lloyd Ogilvie." I want to tell you that was the liberation I needed at that moment in my life! And that's the truth I want to declare to you in this moment – Christ is for you! He's not against you. (p. 49)

With that story in mind, we can better appreciate what the Apostle Paul was saying in his letter to the Christians at Philippi. Paul was especially addressing Jewish Christians, who insisted on keeping the Law of God in order to get right with God, and who expected that gentile converts should also observe God's laws. Paul wrote to set the record straight. He contrasted human attempts at getting right with God with the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. If we base our hope on confidence in the flesh (i.e., by what we do for God, trying to earn God's pleasure by our many merits), we will fall far short of that goal. On the other hand, if our "hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness," - which is to say what God has done on our behalf through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection - then, we have all the reason we need to believe that God is for you and me and not against us.

In order to make his case, the Apostle Paul listed his credentials. If anyone had any reason whatsoever to boast of his or her own merits before God, why it was Paul. No one could compare to, top, or "hang with" Paul when it came to achievements. He had it made if righteousness were based solely on what one could bring to the table! Paul had been circumcised on the eighth day; he was an Israelite, who came from the elite tribe of Benjamin; he was a Hebrew born of Hebrews and a card-carrying member of the Pharisees (the spiritual guardians of Judaism). Furthermore, Paul was so zealous in his own righteousness that he had even persecuted the church. When it came to righteousness under the law, by his own count, Paul had been "blameless."

However, with all that to his credit, Paul knew that there was something missing, some piece of the puzzle that he didn't have or couldn't manufacture. It wasn't until he met the risen Christ on the Damascus Road that he finally saw the light. He realized that all human attainments count as nothing when compared to what Christ had done for him. He saw life in a new light; it wasn't up to him to earn God's favor; it was all up to Christ, and Jesus had accomplished - by his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave - what Paul could not. Christ was for Paul (and you and me!). Christ's faithfulness alone gave Paul the access to God that he desired, and that was all that mattered.

From now on, the Apostle Paul proclaimed, he regarded everything else as rubbish when compared to Christ. And, because Christ was the very source of Paul's faith and his being right with God, Paul no longer desired a flawless and impressive resume or an outstanding performance record. He wanted nothing more than to grow in his personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, which included sharing in much of the same suffering as Jesus and experiencing the power of his resurrection both now and forever.

In so many words, the Apostle Paul tells the Christians at Philippi and all of the saints throughout the centuries to "Keep on growing!" Due to all that Christ Jesus has done for us, we can gratefully respond by doing three things, which will help us to grow in our relationship with the Lord. First, like the Apostle, our lives need to be focused. Paul said, "This one thing I do..." His focus was the "prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Everything he did in his life was aimed in that direction. May we follow in that same direction and focus on Christ as our goal in life. Secondly, the Apostle Paul chose to forget. He wrote, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead..." Paul could've gotten hung up on his human accomplishments; or he could've gone the other way and wallowed in guilt over his persecution of the church. Instead, he accepted the forgiveness Christ offered and put everything in the past where he promptly forgot about them. That's good advice for us as well. Finally, Paul was committed to forging ahead. He said, "but this 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.” If we focus on Christ and his will for our lives, if we forget the things that are better left in the past, and if we forge on to follow Christ in our daily lives, we will indeed keep growing in our faith, in knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection.

The best way we come to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to grow in our relationship with him, is to do those things that Christ did - not in order to win favor with God but as an expression of our gratitude and our desire to live for Christ by living for others. We learn and grow by doing; and, by sharing in the same kind of self-giving love that led Jesus through his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, we will come to know him better and love him more. By responding to the needs in the world around us, we participate in Christ’s resurrection. After all, while Christ is for you and me, Christ is also for the world!

A few months before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon to his flock at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, and he addressed the reality of his own mortality. He said: “every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral... and then I ask myself, ‘What is it that I would want said?’ If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize - that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards - that’s not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I’d like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.” (J. Lynn White, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Fall 2008, pages 5-6)

On this World Communion Sunday, the good news is that Christ is still for the world. Since he has made us his own, by grace, let us strive to be gracious and compassionate toward others. If you want to keep on growing in your relationship with Jesus Christ, share in his sufferings, and feel the power of his resurrection, then the opportunity is now at hand. Let us accept our Lord’s invitation to come to Table and sup with him. Then, let us rise up refreshed and renewed in our determination to love Christ and all others for whom he died. Let us keep on growing in our faith and faithful service until we attain the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus - all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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