

A NUGGET OF JOYFUL POVERTY

Philippians 3: 1-11

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Along the highways of America is a common site from years ago and one which still occasionally appears along roadsides, is a collection of outdoor figurines and sculptures—bird baths and other assorted concrete creations that are being offered for sale. If you have ever stopped at one of these businesses you probably saw a statue of a gentle looking priest, perhaps with outstretched arms beckoning a bird or some other woodland creature to embrace his care. The individual portrayed in concrete is Saint Francis of Assisi. Born in Italy during the Middle Ages, he grew up the child of wealthy parents who were cloth merchants. While still a young man he went off to war, his city in constant conflict with other cities through the region in which he lived. Captured, imprisoned and nearly dead from illness, he returned home, much to the relief of his parents. However, they were shocked and dismayed by the transformation which had occurred in his life. Forsaking their wealth and privilege, he literally disrobed in their presence and adopted a life of poverty as a follower of Christ. He was a self-ordained priest, gathering around himself a group of followers who sensed God's calling to "go and repair my house." At first this consisted of literally rebuilding a little chapel that still stands to this day. Later, Francis realized that what Christ desired for him to do was to rebuild the spiritual life of the Roman Catholic Church. This he accomplished with undiminished determination, sending out his disciples two by two to proclaim the simple gospel message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Throughout his lifetime he had a unique relationship with nature, at times welcoming and preaching to the creatures that were drawn to him. For that reason the Catholic Church has named him the Patron Saint of Ecology and thus the impetus for those garden concrete creations honoring his life. What is of significant importance for us this morning is simply the fact that Saint Francis discovered a nugget of true spiritual gold, a nugget of joyful poverty. Forsaking everything that the world had to offer, including the benefits of a pampered life in his parents' household, he chose Christ and Christ alone. For him, the Savior was the joy of his life, a joy that we even now celebrate when we sing the song that he authored, "All Creatures of our God and King."

Writing to the Philippians, Paul could and indeed did join with Saint Francis in proclaiming the joy which emanates from a life totally dedicated to Christ. In the passage of Scripture which was read this morning he makes it perfectly clear that everything else when compared to Christ can be cast out and thrown aside as rubbish. Let's see what he had to say.

Beginning with the first verse in chapter three, a joyful emphasis is immediately apparent. He declares, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you" (Philippians 3:1). Why did he say that rejoicing in the Lord, being happy because of one's relationship with Christ, is a safeguard, something that protects us from harm? There were two reasons, both of which can be applied to our own lives in Christ.

Here is the first one—circumcision. Or to express it in another way—religious traditions and practices that get in the way of our relationship with Christ. Here's what Paul was talking about. In the early church there were a group of people known as Judaizers. Basically, they said that in order to be a Christian, a person must first adopt the Jewish way of life including the medical procedure known as circumcision. Beginning with Abraham and throughout all of the Jewish generations thereafter, it was an outward physical manifestation for men of the covenantal relationship between God and His people. In other words, simply professing faith in Christ was not enough. You had to live and act like a Jew in order to be a Christian. For Paul this was a denial of everything he proclaimed. He minced no words in condemning this false doctrine. Listen to what he had to say in this more modern translation of verse two, "Watch out for those dogs, those wicked men and their evil deeds, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved" (Philippians 3:2, New Living Translation of the Bible).

Now those of you who have pet dogs, don't be upset with Paul. When he used the word "dogs" he was referring to packs of wild canines who roamed the cities and countryside in the ancient world and who were a menace to both life and limb. Like those wild animals, Paul considered these Judaizers to be just as dangerous. Here's why. They had turned Christianity into something you do instead of something, or should I say Someone in whom you can place your trust and belief.

Fortunately we don't have to worry about Judaizers today, or do we? Well they may not be peddling circumcision, but there are some other ways in which they can throw up roadblocks to a joyous faith relationship with Christ. For example, I remember a time when one's outward appearance was referred to as a way of determining whether a person was or was not a true Christian. For young men it had to do with the length of your hair. It could not touch the collar of your shirt. For young women it was about the length of your dress. It had to be so many inches below your knees. In some instances, I can remember twelve inch rulers being used to determine if the measurements were correct. Seems silly now, but years ago it was a practice that for some Christians was very important, almost more important than sharing the gospel message of God's salvation in Christ Jesus.

Along a more humorous note, let me share a story from the church that I served in Portsmouth. Most of the men who attended still wore a suit or sport coat to church on Sundays. It was a tradition from the past which reflected the long held belief that wearing your best to church was very important. One of the younger men in our church had a different take on this tradition. He felt that it got in the way of leading people to Christ. Our church was located in a difficult part of town and he wondered if people in the community didn't come because they felt out of place, not having the right kind of clothes to wear. So he took it upon himself to cast this tradition aside. He arrived every Sunday wearing a T shirt with a Biblical message inscribed upon it. I admired his courage because not everyone was impressed by this new fashion trend. In particular I remember one T- shirt that was my all-time favorite. Let me describe it for you—an old pair of tennis shoes with socks laying haphazardly within them, a cloud of smoke arising as if the shoes had suddenly been vacated and these words beneath the imprint "in the twinkling of an eye!" Get it? A pictorial description of the rapture. That T- shirt still brings a smile to my face and serves as a reminder that even traditions about what we wear to church on Sundays can become a hindrance to our faith relationship with Christ. And by the way, just in case you're wondering, I still wear a coat and tie on Sundays for two reasons.

First, it's what I grew up with and it still feels comfortable. Second, the inside pocket in the jacket is a great place to hide the wireless microphone transmitter.

Now to the second reason why being joyful in the Lord is so important. It can save us from allowing our personal reputation, our status in the community and even our family's heritage from getting in the way of our relationship to Christ. Once again, let me share with you what Paul had to say from the New Living Translation of the Bible. Paul stated, "If others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more! For I was circumcised when I was eight days old, having been born into a pure-blooded Jewish family that is a branch of the tribe of Benjamin. So I am a real Jew if there ever was one! What's more, I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. And zealous? Yes, in fact, I harshly persecuted the church. And I obeyed the Jewish law so carefully that I was never accused of any fault" (Philippians 3:4-6). Paul had every reason to be proud of his Jewish heritage, but if it stood in the way of his relationship with Christ, it had to be cast aside. Paul believed that the same was true for the Philippians and I'm sure he'd say the same thing to you and me.

Let's be honest. We live in a world of expectations, especially those who have risen in the ranks of society. There are expectations as to where you are to live, with whom you are to associate, and how you are supposed to live. Such was the case with a well-known socialite living in New York City, a woman by the name of Eleanor Searle Whitney. A gifted opera singer married to Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, she had everything—riding stables, yachts, summer homes and an exciting life. She enjoyed the distinction of being one of the best dressed women in America. She was active in many humanitarian causes, led a moral life and regularly attended church. But something was still missing. She was spiritually impoverished. All of the high society acclaim that this world has to offer could not satisfy a profound emptiness in her heart. That's when she decided to attend a Billy Graham Crusade in New York City. When Dr. Graham gave an invitation to receive Christ as Lord and Savior, a momentous struggle ensued within her soul. She thought, "What will my friends think if I go forward? How ridiculous it all seems!" But she returned and casting aside all of her doubts and reluctance, she walked forward during the service that evening and professed faith in Christ. She became a well-known evangelistic speaker, sang during several of Billy Graham's crusades and wrote a book about her spiritual journey called 'Invitation to Joy.' Describing her decision to follow Christ, she said, "I hung onto God and found He was enough."

That's precisely what Paul did, that's what he wanted the Philippians to do and that's what I believe he wants us to do. To paraphrase what he said in those concluding verses in today's passage of Scripture, I can even now hear him saying to us, "For goodness sake, don't let old, restrictive religious traditions and society's values and expectations stand in the way of your relationship with Christ. If they do get in the way, throw them out of your life like so much worthless rubbish. Even though the world may consider them to be valuable, you're better off without them. In fact, they can actually keep you from experiencing what it really means to know Christ, feeling the power of His resurrection at work in your life and sensing a fellowship with Him that sustains us when like Him, we suffer for being a Christian. Yes, rejoicing in the Lord is like possessing a nugget of joyful poverty.