

“OUR SPIRITUAL RESUMÉ”

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October 2, 2011

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Philippians 3:[2-4a], 4b-14

With all the troubles with airline delays these days, there was one man who was growing more and more impatient as he tried to get on the plane. He was on standby and desperately needed to get to a meeting. The attendant spoke into the microphone repeatedly, “Those of you who are waiting, please sit down and we will call you when it is your turn.”

However, this man was not one to take no for an answer. He was an executive in this airline, and he needed to get on this airplane. As he approached the counter, the attendant said again into the microphone, “If you are waiting, please take a seat and we will call you when it is your turn.”

Evidently, he did not think that this pertained to him and proceeded to talk to the attendant, telling her how important it was for him to be on that airplane. She told him to be seated, and she would call him when it was his turn. Then he pulled the trump card. He said to her in a strong voice, “Do you know who I am?”

With that, the exasperated attendant paused, picked up the microphone again and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have a man who doesn’t know who he is. Please claim him, put him back in line, and I’ll talk to him when it’s his turn.”¹

In Philippians, Paul reels off his resume, letting people know not who he is, but who he was . . . what identified him prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus. On the very day of his conversion, he had been carrying letters to the synagogues of Damascus, seeking out heretics to the Jewish faith, Christians, or “People of the Way”. This is what he refers to as his zeal against the church. None of his then peers would have thought those credentials to be anything less than stellar.

“Nobody was more ‘blameless’ than Saul of Tarsus. Or so he thought at the time. But then Saul met a certain person on the road to Damascus — a man whose name he used to curse, a man whose followers he used to hunt down like dogs. This man he met on the road — that same Jesus of Nazareth — was a dead man. A dead man who spoke to him.

“Later on, Saul would learn that this Jesus was no longer dead, but had been raised up by God. At the time, all those contradictory thoughts piled up, each one upon the next, until he no longer knew who he was.”² Then gradually, through prayerful reflection and having his sight healed by Ananias, Saul of Tarsus took on the identity we know him by . . . he became Paul, evangelist to the Gentiles, founder of churches, and writer of letters we read to this day.

So now, writing to the Philippians as Paul — *[RIP UP RESUME]* — he refers to the marks of his former life as worthless. He doesn’t deny them. He simply no longer values them. Like many others through history, Jesus has taken Saul and turned his life upside down.

Apparently there were those in the Philippian church who prided themselves in their Jewish roots and who - *PERHAPS* - thought reverting to the legalisms of the law was an easier way to salvation than starting anew in this grand new adventure called the Church. We all like to lean on what we know and what we do well. And to follow a new and unknown path – to change – is terribly threatening. And - *PERHAPS* - these folk also

felt “if it was good enough for me, it’s good enough for you,” and expected the Gentile men to submit to circumcision. Paul seeks to persuade the people to a different and spiritual way of identifying themselves. (*Doesn’t seem too difficult to me!*)

Paul is making his personal testimony, saying that none of his past — his status by birth, his status by Jewish ritual, or his status by works — is important any more. Only one thing matters now, and that is his relationship with Jesus Christ. He’s not concerned as we might be today, about identity theft . . . “For Paul, it’s far more important to focus on his identity gift: the new life he has received in Jesus.”³ Paul’s goal is to know or experience Christ, and to do this through imitating the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. And always with the reward in sight . . . an ever more intimate relationship with God for all time.

“So what is it that gives you your identity? Your family connections? Your job? Your professional accomplishments? Your grades? Your trophies? Your investment portfolio? Compared to knowing Jesus, Paul is saying, all these things are as nothing. They’re worse than nothing, in fact. They’re trash. The Greek word Paul uses, here, could be rendered politely by the word, ‘dung’ — although the true English translation is a word that can’t be spoken in polite company.

“And why does Paul use such strong language? Because he knows all too well how seductive the prizes and rewards of this world can be. They can become heavy weights that pull us down and impede our spiritual progress.”

“Remember Charles Dickens’ famous story, *A Christmas Carol*? Remember how the ghost of Scrooge’s business partner, Jacob Marley, appears to him one night? Listen to it again, as Dickens describes it: *‘The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel.’*

“Jacob Marley, like Ebenezer Scrooge, had spent his entire life driving hard bargain after hard bargain, until he’d made himself wealthy in the sort of things the world values. Then Marley died—and, in the life to come (in the novelist’s imagination), he soon realized that the ink in his own cosmic ledger-book was a different color than what he’d expected. What had been clean, crisp, black in in life became an oozing red in death. Listen again, as Dickens picks up the story a bit later:

“ ‘You are fettered,’ said Scrooge, trembling. ‘Tell me why?’
 ‘I wear the chain I forged in life,’ replied the ghost. ‘I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will, I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?’
 Scrooge trembled more and more.
 ‘Or would you know,’ pursued the ghost, ‘the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself?’ It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!’”

“The ponderous chain of religious [status] that Saul of Tarsus had spent half his life forging, he had the good sense to unwind from around himself and abandon once he met Jesus Christ. Saul gave up his identity and with it even his name. He became someone completely new: Paul, child of God and disciple of Jesus. What he had once been no longer mattered.”⁴

In I Corinthians, Paul says it in words that we repeat often in worship, and cherish, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

Paul’s testimony followed an ancient practice as part of his letter of persuasion to the Philippians. In the coming weeks, members of this congregation will be invited to share their own spiritual resumé – a personal testimony, of sorts. And this coming week, you’ll receive a letter, inviting you to consider how you can make tangible your commitment to God, to following in Jesus’ footsteps. You’ll be encouraged to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in your daily life choices. It’s called a stewardship campaign, and, yes, we’ll be talking about money — one of the most tangible ways to put flesh & bones on our faith. But the goal? It’s not really funding the budget. It’s not really about having the best maintained building, the most creative church school, and the most inspirational worship . . . it’s about seeking to know Christ intimately, to live out our faith - to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. As one writer puts it, “None of the identity markers that say we are people of faith is more important than a community’s heart-centered desire to know and to be like Christ.”⁵

Traditionally, we speak of time, talent, and treasure when we speak of stewardship. But in the graphic you’ll see in our newsletter, there are two more T’s. One T is “trees”, and that seems easy enough to explain . . . it’s about our stewardship of the earth. God made us stewards of all life on earth, as well as tillers of the ground – responsible gardeners and share-ers of the bounty of the land.

The last T in the graphic, however, is subject to definition — you may wish to email or tweet me what you think it means. The word is “tissue”. My best guess is that it refers to all the throw-aways of life, yet another reference to the environment. But it could mean flesh as tissue, vs. trees as green plants. Or it could refer to things delicate or ephemeral and in need of extra care. Tweet me! Email me! Text me! When you reflect on stewardship as following Christ in your daily life, what would you put on the same level as time, talent, treasure, and trees?

ENDNOTES

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1. Scott Suskovic, writing in *The Immediate Word*, an online resource of CSS Publishing, March 4, 2007.
 2. Carlos Wilton, *Lectionary Preaching Workbook*, Series VIII, Cycle A, p. 328. This entire essay is the springboard for today’s sermon.
 3. *Op cit*, 329.
 4. *Op cit*, 329-331.
 5. Crainshaw, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, 136.