

I Want to Know Christ

Philippians 3:4-14

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Juan Carlos Ortiz once retold Jesus' parable about a pearl of great price. "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:45,46). As Ortiz told it, when we find Jesus, it costs us everything. He has happiness, joy, peace, healing, security, eternity, everything. So we say:

"I want this pearl. How much is it?"

"Well," the seller say, "it's very expensive."

"But how much?" we ask. "Well, a very large amount."

"Do you think I could buy it?" "Oh, of course. Everyone can buy it."

"But didn't you say it was very expensive?" "Yes."

"Well, how much is it?" "Everything you have," says the seller.

We make up our minds. "All right, I'll buy it," we say.

"Well, what do you have?" he wants to know. "Let's write it down."

"Well, I have ten thousand dollars in the bank."

"Good-ten thousand dollars. What else?"

"That's all. That's all I have."

"Nothing more?"

"Well, I have a few dollars here in my pocket."

"How much?"

We start digging. "Well, let's see-thirty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred, a hundred twenty dollars."

"That's fine. What else do you have?"

"Well, nothing. That's all."

"Where do you live?" He's still probing.

"In my house. Yes, I have a house."

“The house, too, then.” He writes that down.

“You mean I have to live in my camper?”

“You have a camper? That, too. What else?”

“I’ll have to sleep in my car!”

“You have a car?”

“Two of them.”

“Both become mine, both cars. What else?”

“Well, you already have my money, my house, my camper, my cars. What more do you want?”

“Are you alone in this world?”

“No, I have a wife and two children...”

“Oh, yes, your wife and children, too. What else?”

“I have nothing left! I am left alone now.”

Suddenly the seller exclaims, “Oh, I almost forgot! You yourself, too! Everything becomes mine-wife, children, house, money cars-and you too.”¹

As Juan Carlos Ortiz tells the story we end up empty handed by the time we have given it all. And then Jesus puts it back in our hands and reminds us it all belongs to him. It is a wonderful retelling of a striking parable where Jesus is the pearl of great price and we would give everything to have him.

This morning we have before us a testimony from the Apostle Paul about Jesus Christ and his incomparable worth. Paul doesn’t give a testimony about cars and houses and check books and giving those things up so he can have a relationship with Jesus Christ. What Paul recounts are all the things that gave him standing, status, identity, access, entrance to an inner circle, respect, and prestige. It might not resonate with us, but when Paul says he was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in

¹ Juan Carlos Ortiz. Disciple, Creation House, Carol Stream, Illinois. 1975. p. 34, 35.

regard to the laws a Pharisee, a persecutor of the church, and standing before the law with a righteousness that faultless, he is saying that in the circles he ran he was in, he belonged, he had risen to the top, he was the cream of the crop. And into that well-ordered and self-satisfied if not even proud life this man named Jesus Christ dropped in and changed everything.

But it is at the moment Jesus Christ drops into the life of Paul that things take a different turn compared to the Pearl of Great Price. Almost immediately, if not immediately, Paul realizes Jesus is of incomparable worth. I am talking about the dramatic encounter Paul has with the risen Christ. Paul does not meet the Christ of the gospels, the Jesus who walked and taught. By the time Paul meets Christ, Jesus has died and been raised from the dead. That risen Christ appears to Paul as he is motoring along on the road to a town called Damascus. An important part of the story is that Paul was heading to Damascus for the intent purpose of persecuting followers of Jesus Christ. Paul describes himself at this point as an enemy of Christ. This persecutor of Christians, this enemy of Christ, this man with an identity and place in his community that is solid and secure, is met by the risen Christ.

What ensues is not a bargaining and bartering where Paul offers to Jesus his circumcision, or his place of status in the people of Israel or the tribe of Benjamin, Paul doesn't hold out his title as a Pharisee and say, "Will this get me in?" Paul doesn't offer anything to Jesus. As Paul looks back on his life, on his encounter with Jesus Christ, what he comes to realize is Jesus Christ gives him everything, and not just immediately. Paul comes to realize Jesus Christ has given him way beforehand, way before they ever met. To Paul the persecutor, and each one of us, each human being, Jesus Christ has given each one of us the gift of his life, death, resurrection, healing, hope, forgiveness, salvation, righteousness, and so much more, Jesus Christ has given that on the cross. Long before Paul or any of us meet Jesus Christ he has already given us the gift of his life, his death, and his resurrection.

The beautiful statement describing this is found in Romans 5 where this same Paul writes, “God proves his love for us in this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” What Paul discovers in his encounter with the risen Christ is that there is no bargaining or bartering that secures or purchases or earns this gift. It truly is a gift, given freely by God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. By grace we have been saved. Grace is a gift. We did not bargain or buy this gift, we did not earn it or deserve it, and we do not work for it. We simply receive this gift through faith, through believing the good news that God loves this world so much he has given his one and only Son, for the sake of salvation.

And yet for Paul life does not simply go on as it was before he met the risen Christ. Today in his testimony that we read in Philippians chapter 3 he tells us everything in his life changed dramatically. From that moment on, from the moment of that encounter, Jesus Christ has become the most important thing in Paul’s life. He didn’t have to barter or bargain to receive this gift of a relationship with Jesus Christ. It truly was a free gift. But having received that gift, he now looks back on all the things that gave him status and identity and acceptance and pride and prestige and he says that compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ, those things mean nothing. He says I think of them as a loss. Their value has disappeared to me. He even calls them rubbish. Let me tell you, those things did matter to Paul and those things did matter to others. They mattered every bit as much as houses and degrees and titles and affluence and influence and social standing. Those things mattered just like there are things that matter in our world today. But now Jesus Christ is on the scene. Now Paul has met Jesus Christ, and his life will never be the same.

The encounter Paul the Apostle had with Jesus Christ was not just a one and done. They did not meet, have an exchange of religious salvation, and then part ways. From that moment on Paul realized the greatest thing in life is to know and be known by Jesus Christ. From that moment on Paul offered himself as a living sacrifice to Jesus Christ. At that moment Paul was crucified with Christ, and it was no longer Paul who was living, but Christ was living in Paul. Paul’s encounter with

Jesus Christ was not a one and done. It was a lifelong relationship where every day Paul wanted to know Christ, to know about this power of the resurrection that kept bringing new creation everywhere Paul went in this world, and Paul discovered the only way he kept encountering resurrection was to follow Christ on the path of entering into the suffering of this world, the dying and decaying of this world, the hurt and the heartache of this world. It certainly sounds to us like a strange journey.

On this journey Paul kept finding that Jesus Christ was true to his word. He kept bringing life out of death. He kept overcoming the powers of this world. He kept changing lives and creating community and tearing down the walls of hostility. Jesus Christ kept on doing what Jesus Christ will keep on doing from now until that great day when he returns to completely restore the kingdom of God. Jesus Christ kept on reconciling the world and taking those things that are old and making them new. That is what Paul believed when he said, “In Christ Jesus there is new creation. The old is gone and behold the new has come.”

We live in a world that oversells the promise of wealth and status and fame and power and beauty and sexuality and physical fitness and...a hundred other things. The world oversells these things as if having them would bring us contentment and peace and fulfillment. There are a lot of folks who have these very things and they discover there can still be a deep emptiness and yearning and searching and hunger. Sadly, there are countless ones who have not obtained these things and yet they are laboring under the delusion that if I just had this or that then...then...

Into this world that has been oversold on these temporal and temporary things it can be tempting to undersell the gospel. All we have is a little tiny pearl, and in a glitzy and glamorous world, um, maybe you'd be interested, it's not much, but here is this pearl if you have some time to take a look. Into this world that has been oversold on the immediate and the superficial and the bright and shiny things of conspicuous consumption, it is tempting to undersell the gospel. Well, we have this thing called a cross. It is old, it is rugged, it is really nothing more than an emblem of suffering and shame. By this point we expect people to walk away as they hear the sirens of this world screaming out to come and play.

This morning I do not want to undersell the gospel. I do not want to undersell the pearl of great price. This morning I do not want to undersell the cross of Jesus Christ. Maybe today you are here because you are looking for something that is not temporal, that is not temporary, that is not superficial, that is not glamorous or glitzy. Maybe you are looking for something lasting and eternal. Maybe you are here because you hunger for a relationship with the living God. Maybe you are here because your own power and your own status and your own achievements have added up to a lot, but they have not added up to the deep joy of being known by the living God, and they have not added up to the joy of knowing this living God who has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Maybe this morning you are here because nothing adds up in your life and you are empty and lost and even hopeless, and yet you have come here hoping maybe there is someone who has a place for you. This morning I do not want to undersell the gospel. Every hope, every desire, every longing, every yearning, every heartbreak, every sorrow, is met in this person named Jesus whom we call the Christ, the Anointed One, the Savior, the Lord of heaven and of earth.

This morning we have heard a story of a woman named Mary who came up to this Jesus as he was making his way to the cross. Somehow she understood where he was headed. Somehow she grasped how great the love of God is, that he would not spare his own Son but send him to die for human beings. Perhaps she grasped how great the love of Jesus is, who said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends. Somehow she grasped that Jesus was the pearl of great price. She took an expensive jar of perfume, poured it on the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair. I think in a beautiful way, in a tender way, in a touching way, she was saying to the world, “This one is my Lord. He is of incomparable worth. And I love him.” When we don’t undersell the gospel and the cross and the love of God, there is the chance that people see Jesus for who he is and they bow down in worship and adoration and cover him with love and devotion.

A woman pulled into the church parking lot of our church in Houston. This was about fifteen years ago. She had lots of hesitations about coming to church. She had negative feelings from past church experiences, guilt and shame from past church experiences, guilt and shame from her own life and her choices and her brokenness. So she bargained with God. She bartered with God as she pulled into the church parking lot. God, I don't really want to be here. I am dragging my feet to be here. If there is one sign that I shouldn't be here I am turning around. But there was no sign, so she parked her car. She mustered all her courage and fortitude and she opened the car door. She stepped out. She made her way, one dragging foot in front of the other toward the church doors. And then she received a sign. Her car alarm went off. She never heard such a joyful noise. She turned around, headed to her car, and had every intention of driving away and never looking back. She asked for a sign and she received her sign.

On her way back to her car a member of the church just happened to be walking by. This member noticed the woman was new to church. She stopped her, introduced herself, welcomed her, told her how happy she was to see her, and invited her to come in, to have a cup of coffee, to meet some people, and to sit with her in worship. Dragging her feet the visitor grudgingly made her way inside the church walls.

When our friend tells her story she has fun with the dragging of her feet and the bargaining with God and the surprise of the car alarm. But what I love best is that when she tells what happened in church that day, what happened in worship, what happened when she heard the gospel, what happened when Jesus Christ made himself known to her, when Jesus Christ met her with his forgiveness and grace and love and mercy, what happened when she experienced the joy of new creation, of the old being gone and the new coming, this woman does not undersell the gospel. With a radiant smile she tells of finding new life in Jesus Christ. And just like Paul, for this woman her encounter with Jesus Christ was not a one and done. For her it is a relationship. And what she says in her own way is this: "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection of the

dead. Not that I have already obtained this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”