

Wednesday, July 26, 2017 - Day 206 – Proverbs 29-31, Psalm 18:21-50, Philippians 3

The passage from his Letter to the Philippians could be titled, "Confessions of a recovering control freak. While his statement, "I regard everything as a loss" (3:7) may seem rather general, he is in fact referring to something very specific: his religious past. Before he was Paul, he was Saul- a Pharisee who was absolutely committed to perfection. In short, he was a religious control freak. In the passage that occurs just before today's reading he describes it, "If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew among Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; a to righteousness under the law; blameless." (Phil 3:4-6)

Paul is boasting of his religious accomplishments. Under the Law, salvation was earned. You gained a relationship with G-D by living and behaving in a very particular way. And under the rules of that system, no one did it better than Saul. He had it all down - from the dress, to the hygiene to the diet to the prayers, to the sacrifices to the holy days.... he had it all down pat. If anyone earned their relationship with God, it was Saul.

So what happened? What caused Saul to turn away from everything that he believed and call it rubbish? As part of his conversion Paul was able to see the hard truth - that although his zeal was all consuming and his conduct was blameless, he had become an enemy of the very God he was sworn to serve. This left him with one rather startling conclusion - the only way to continue to serve God was to give up faith in his own ability.

Basically what we learn from Paul is this; being a control freak doesn't work when it comes to faith. Of course that's something Christians are already supposed to understand - for grace cannot be earned and salvation is a free gift. However, just because we are supposed to believe that doesn't mean that we have stopped trying to earn our way into heaven. A whole lot of Christians seem to spend way too much time still trying to define and create that perfect system - one that nails down all the laws and practices once and for all. Yet as we see in Saul, our obsession with control can lead us to worship the system and not the God that system is meant to serve.

As you might imagine, when we become control freaks about our faith, it creates some unfortunate side effects - we end up spending a great deal of our time and energy in an endless pursuit of creating criteria and then trying to fulfill them. And the harder we push to gain control of our identity; the more damage is done to our unity and our spiritual health. Every minute we spend on such endeavors is one less minute we have to devote to our ultimate goal - drawing closer to God. So long as we try to create system that can be mastered, so long as we put faith in our ability, we succeed only in cutting ourselves off from experiencing all the new things that God is doing. And that is the saddest part of all since new things - new life- new possibilities - that is what God is all about.

Our challenge, is to recognize this truth and, more importantly, to put it into practice. That's hard, because when it comes to faith, there's a little Saul in each of us. I know there's some in me - it comes out in my drive and desire to always try and get things right and in my willingness to take on a sense of personal responsibility for every that goes on, whether it is my purview or not. For example, every Sunday during worship I try to make sure everything is perfect - to make sure every word is well spoken, every gesture precise. Why? Because I have convinced myself that if I somehow manage to get it all correct, the worship will be more meaningful and God will draw nearer to us all. Thankfully, God does not depend on my perfection, or the perfection of the acolytes or of the choir. God is present and among us no matter how well we perform. And so I am learning to accept that while precision is important, it does not all depend on me. I must to let go, to stop worrying about everything that is going on during the service and instead to focus my attention more fully on God.

You might have a little Saul in you too. It keeps pushing you to get it right because, somehow, everything all depends on you! It drives you to take responsibility for too many things or even for other people. Now being a control freak can be unhealthy in your work or home life, but, as we learn from Paul, when it comes to your faith, it can be absolutely destructive. Because, no matter how hard we try, there is nothing we can do to earn God's grace or merit our salvation. We need to change our mind set. So ask yourself, how is the Saul in you leading you to take on responsibility for things you cannot control? How is it making you rigid or closed off? Are the details obscuring the bigger picture? Is your faith really helping you feel closer to God or is the Saul in you keeping you from experiencing the new and wonderful possibilities that God is trying to bring about in your life?

As we close I want to go back to Paul because no one knew how hard it is to try and overcome being a control freak better than him. At the end of the lesson he reminds us of what is most important - that the way of salvation is not ours, salvation belongs to God alone. So instead of trying to control the terms of your faith, let go and let God be in control. It's not easy to stop feeling like you have to be responsible for everything, but the truth is, Jesus has already done the work for you. Imagine the relief that comes from knowing that you don't have to do it all... the relief of knowing that you don't have to be perfect all the time! Salvation is a gift... stop trying to earn it and instead embrace the joy of living it!

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