

Homily for November 5th 2020

As kids we brag most about the stuff we've been born to or gifted with — a bigger house, a cooler bike, a taller stack of video games, the latest model computer, the newest cell phone. As adults we brag most about the stuff, we feel we've earned — a bigger paycheck, a better college, a successful career, a position of power and influence, how far we've climbed from where we started.

In today's epistle text Paul covers all that bragging territory and then some as he argues against those who were advocating the prerequisite of Jewishness for Gentile Christians. These "Judaizers" were insisting that those not born Jewish must become Jews through the rite of circumcision and obedience to Torah law in order to be full members of the Christian community of faith.

Paul's rejection of this teaching could not have been more adamant. But he begins his attack with a lengthy litany of his own unquestionably elite status within Judaism. If anyone had bragging rights, it was Paul. In strict obedience to the Torah Paul was circumcised on "the eighth day" in accordance with Leviticus 12:3:

And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

He makes it clear three times over that his ancestry, his bloodline, has been Jewish for generations. He identifies himself as a member of "the people of Israel" and specifically as a descendent of "the tribe of Benjamin." Benjamin was distinguished not only by its patriarch being the only one of Jacob's sons born in the Promised Land, but was also a "royal tribe," the tribe from which Israel's first king, Saul, was chosen.

But besides being "Hebrew" by birth, Paul notes that he embraced his Jewishness and excelled at piety through his own commitments and choices. Paul identified himself as a "Pharisee," that party within first century Judaism that stressed rigorous obedience to all tenants of Torah law. Although the image of Pharisaic Judaism presented in the gospels is far from flattering, it was the commitment of Phariseeism to bring the obedience to the law into every facet of everyday life that enabled Judaism to survive after the destruction of the Temple and its sacrificial culture in 70 AD.

Even as a Pharisee Paul reveals that he was particularly zealous, not only practicing the law but protecting it from any who seemed to challenge its ultimate authority. This protective "zeal" led him to "persecute" the church. Paul's rigorous Pharisaic obedience to all of the Torah, and his enthusiastic protection of the Law's authority through the persecution of those calling themselves Christians, lead him here to a final assertion.

According to the way righteousness is spelled out in the Law Paul declares himself to be "blameless," or "without fault." Now there is something to brag about!

It is precisely at this moment when Paul has proven how great his confidence should be in himself and his status that the apostle turns the tables. Using the language of accounting, Paul now declares all that which had been counted as "gain" is a dead loss "because of Christ." The

person of Jesus Christ changed everything. The “loss” and “gain” sheets have been exchanged for Paul by the transformative act of “knowing Christ Jesus.”

“Knowing” is more than an intellectual assertion. “Knowing” in both Greek and Hebrew entailed a deep, even intimate relationship. Among the first century mystery religions “gnosis” or “knowledge” was the key to being connected to the deity. Paul declares that “knowing” Christ Jesus has revealed to him just how flawed were his previous perceptions and assertions. Not only are those things his previous world saw as “gain” — his noble lineage, his pharisaic piety, his zealous defense of the Law — a valueless “loss.” They are all garbage (“skybala” — literally “excrement”) now that he has “gained” Christ.

In knowing Christ, Paul discovered that his previous attitude of confidence was indicative of his being lost. He was the coin, the poor woman had lost, the sheep far from the fold. Such a change occurred in his attitude and view of himself that he would write one in his second to last letter these words:

The boastfulness of his earlier life gives way to gratitude for having now been found by Christ and a prideful heart is exchanged for a joy-filled heart. May we too be such acute accountants who can too:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ¹