

Think of all those people who may be venturing into a church building this morning for the first time in years. Or maybe church people who've been away from Church for a while, but somehow remembered or read somewhere that today's the first day of Lent. Maybe in their childhood they were taught you have to make some awful sacrifice for Lent—so they come to worship God this morning.

What do you think they're hoping for? Veterans in the life of faith may be here aware of how you can delight God by worshiping Him; you might be here asking, to paraphrase JFK during this election season, "what you can do for Christ's Church;" you might be eager to grow in faithfulness so that you may be called by God into an ever greater, more demanding and more rewarding God-assignment...but how about those novices checking out "church" for maybe the first time?

I think what they're looking for, maybe even desperately hoping for, is exactly what the apostle Paul is offering, and he says it at least twice: "to experience Christ." If newcomers to church were already experiencing Christ then they wouldn't be newcomers—they, too, would be "veterans" and "regulars" (how can you keep people away from worshiping God who have truly, deeply experienced Him?)—but in any case Paul's promise sounds pretty inviting to followers of Jesus at every level. Don't you and I put up with a lot of frustrations in the life of faith, a lot of apparently unsatisfying prayer time, a lot of investment spending hoping that sooner or later we'll end up more deeply experiencing the love, the forgiveness, the deep connection, the power of the risen Christ thru the Holy Spirit today?

You all know this is the first Sunday in Lent, the Church's 40-day season of preparation leading up to Easter Sunday, the high point of the Christian calendar and the celebration of the most important event in human history.

We've heard that wry old expression "you can't get there from here." (When I was a boy, I remember we received an LP, a record, from my aunt who lived in Maine. I think it was called "Down East," it recorded some very dry Maine humor. A visitor asked a gas station attendant, "Does this road go from here to Bangor?" A long pause... "Nope...It doesn't go anywhere. It just lies there, all day long.")

This is a fitting Sunday for us to reconsider, again, how we may get "there" from "here." How we may come to experience more of the joy and power of the Resurrected Christ at the end of Lent, Easter Sunday, every Sunday. Every day. How we may experience more of the guidance and reassurance of the Holy Spirit moment-to-moment in our own lives. How we may live in the peace which Jesus promised us, the "peace which surpasses understanding," because He has finally overcome the world, even when our circumstances are frightening. How we may venture and risk and grow to live into the fullness of our human God-created capacities, knowing whenever it might be that we die, we left nothing behind. How we may live, as Paul was promising, "in the sharing of Christ's suffering": followers of Jesus follow Him into the difficult and uncomfortable situations, too, and so are found to be "in Christ" not only in our ease and comforts but especially in those places we would never have ventured on our own. Jesus did not hold back, staying only in the convenient locations.

This is the morning to ponder getting to God's "There:" to live more fully within the Kingdom of God; to live in eternal life, after we die and in this lifetime, here and now; to experience the heavenly feast; to come Home finally into divine His love and care. Heaven. (So many different ways to envision what Paul describes in our lesson as "the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.")

If it seems "you can't get There from here" it's because the only way we get There (let's say "heaven," for short-hand) is so counter-intuitive, so counter-cultural, so anti-common sense. So anti-American, (so anti-European, for that matter, and anti-Jewish and anti-Hellenistic—so anti-human nature.) Everybody knows how to attain those things very important to us, and especially those things worthwhile: we work for them. We strive, we sacrifice, we prioritize, we invest ourselves, we deprive ourselves of non-essentials, we work hard and with discipline, and eventually we achieve the goal. We Americans work hard, we "make it happen."

This normal way of attaining things worthwhile is exactly how we do not, may not, achieve the greatest Prize. What so many of us are here for.

Maybe this is why Jesus describes our entering into the life of faith in such jarring word pictures. "The Way is narrow which leads to Life." "You must enter into the Kingdom as a child, or you may not enter into it at all." "No one can enter the Kingdom without being born anew... without being born of water and the Spirit."

Jesus is only talking about entry points and journeys appropriate to the destinations or ends we seek. We mostly think it's a reasonable investment for our high school kids to study hard, take AP classes, excel in sports and student leadership, get top grades and high SAT scores and then hope to be accepted into a selective university. That makes sense. It makes no sense for them to pay this price for four years of high school and expect as a result to be invited to play in the Super Bowl. The end is not appropriate to the journey.

It would be foolish to rush to the John Wayne airport to arrive by noon only to discover you were reserved on a train for Chicago leaving from Union Station in L. A. an hour before. The route is not appropriate to the end. It may be a healthy practice to go to the gym each day and swim and spin and stretch and lift weights and eat healthy and count calories—but don't expect this to gain you a new Ferrari, or a promotion to become leader of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The process, the journey, may be a worthwhile one—but you can only arrive at a desired end by following a journey appropriate to the end.

It seems natural, at first, to assume that we can "know Christ" the same way we achieve so many other worthwhile goals in our lives. We make a plan, we work hard, we take charge—and Bingo—it doesn't work in the Christian life. [This is, by the way, another of the appeals of the generic "spirituality", the counterfeit religion so popular with folks under about 40 years of age, and particularly the formally-educated. To be "spiritual" you might pray, or meditate, or write checks to charities, or volunteer for charities, and not have anything against Jesus, and go about your life trying to be a "good person" however you might understand or interpret that project. Nothing wrong with any of this—only it must then be maddening to begin to investigate the Christian faith and be told that all this will never get you where you want to go; that by this common-sense approach "you can't get There from here." What? I'm supposed to become as a child? Repent? Start all over again? Be baptized and drown to my old self, symbolically die?]

If we translate a bit, this is exactly what the apostle Paul is explaining to the Philippians. Attaining the heavenly prize; day-to-day, moment-to-moment, experiencing the risen Christ, is not a do-it-yourself proposition. Communion with the Holy Spirit of Jesus is not one more crown to be added proudly to our trophy case of accomplishment and success.

This does not sound like good news to a lot of people in communities like Corona del Mar. Maybe not even to some of us, at least some of the time. “Blessed are the poor in spirit?” That sounds vaguely ominous, whatever it may mean. “Sell all that you have when you find the Pearl of Great Price?” Jesus sounds like a better deal when you have nothing to sell, nothing to lose, nothing with which to buy the Pearl.

(No wonder the gospel is spreading so quickly in the Developing World; tens of thousands every day are coming into the Kingdom. We might expect that—when people have nothing to sell, and are forced to pray desperately and rely upon others in the church merely to survive one day to the next, what does it cost to buy the Pearl of Great Price? Jesus is a bargain for other people, some might think. [Jesus as Game Show Prize: it’s a lot easier to opt for the \$100,000 grand prize when you only have \$500 to lose than when you stand to lose \$50,000 with one wrong guess. That’s when the contestants sweat.]

No wonder the gospel continues to meet such resistance among people who are doing well playing by the rules of common sense—work hard, pay your own way, earn what you deserve. The usual strategies to human achievement seem to be working fairly well for many people in Orange County. So no wonder the reality of the Holy Spirit, “the power of His resurrection” remains so elusive to so many. No wonder the life of prayer remains underwhelming to so many, and Jesus seems distant, and His Church in general exerts such little influence.

A lot of people have not “hit bottom,” have not become helpless—and in fact many live their lives in such a controlled and risk-averse way that this may never happen to them. (Many of you know, by the way, I’m a big fan of “hitting bottom,” of coming absolutely to “the end of your self,” as the Prodigal Son did in Jesus’ parable. I’m sure I would never have taken Jesus as seriously as I finally did had I not been so starkly confronted with the unequivocal reality that I was making a serious mess of my own life. I had for years been digging myself into a hole getting so deep I was beginning to wonder how I would ever be able to dig myself out of it. When I could no longer pretend my own strategy for life was working, or was likely ever to work, is when trying to give my life to Jesus seemed to make a lot of sense!)

In our lesson Paul is offering a slightly different approach to entering into the life of faith; perhaps a different emphasis for “repentance.” The starting point doesn’t have to be abject failure, “hitting bottom.” (The entry point and the process still have to be appropriate to the end—as Garrison Keillor is reputed to have observed: sitting in a garage doesn’t turn you into a car; sitting in a church pew doesn’t turn you into a Christian.) We do not attain the riches in Christ by earning them like yearend bonuses for high sales quotas reached. A love relationship with God in Christ is not for sale, and there is no currency we can pay which will allow us to “experience Christ Jesus.” God does not accept bribes.

In our lesson, Paul is not listing his failures—he is listing his certifications and successes. (I love the fact that Paul is not pretending what is not so. God never asks us to be stupid or untruthful.) Paul counts his accomplishments as “gains”—he came to see them as loss only insofar as they kept him from knowing Jesus more closely and relying upon Him more daringly.

Hear Paul’s resume, his pedigree, and what he has accomplished—but bottom line, whatever anyone could boast, Paul could do him one better. Paul had been circumcised when he was eight days old—unlike the Ishmaelites or the Hellenistic converts who came later into the Jewish faith. He had been observant since he was born. Paul was “a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.” He stood in covenant relationship to God thru Abraham and Sarah; not like the Edomites or others. In fact, Paul came from the tribe of Benjamin: he was from the cream of the Israelite crop. Benjamin was the son of Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel, and Benjamin was the only one of the twelve of Jacob’s sons born in the Promised Land. The first king of Israel had been a Benjaminite (and it was this King Saul for whom Paul, Saul of Tarsus, had no doubt been named.) In several other respects, the clan of Benjamin were seen as the most elect of Israel. No one could top Paul’s lineage.

Not only was Saul born a true-blue Jew, but he was “a Hebrew born of Hebrews,” and a Pharisee full of zeal as well. The great majority of Jews at the time spoke the common language—Greek—but Paul was one of the handful who could also still speak Hebrew, the religious language. And a Pharisee was one “separated” out of the rest of the Jews; there were over a million Jews in Alexandria alone and there were, at most, 6000 Pharisees in the world. Paul was one, and one of the most ardent, zealous of the lot to protect his religion. Not only that, he was “blameless” under the Law: there was no demand under the Law he did not fulfill.

These characteristics mean little to us since we do not value what his audience did. In our time a translation might read something like this: “my family came over on the Mayflower, and I’m a sixth generation Californian. I graduated undergraduate from Duke with my Ph.D. in Engineering from CalTech and my Doctorate in Law from Harvard. Before I founded and built up and sold my software startup company for \$1.3 billion, I argued and won three cases before the Supreme Court and served two years in Uganda in the Peace Corps. I am fluent in six languages. (Did I mention that I was the Cy Young Award-winning starting pitcher in the seventh game the last time the Angels won the World Series?)”

You get the picture. In Paul’s world, in whatever form of “can you top that,” wherever he went, Paul *could* top that. (He mentions these qualifications not to boast, but to settle the question as to whether he had any credentials when he spoke about Jesus. It was for the sake of His Lord He mentions these things—and yes Paul did!)

Paul refers to his accomplishments as “gain,” as “cash”—he does not pretend they were not good. Those accomplishments we have gained may well be noteworthy, admirable. No need to pretend otherwise. But they can never get us where we all want to go. We can never get to God’s “There” from the “here” of our own achieving or inheriting.

It all changes for Paul when he discovers that those things he was most proud of can only get in the way of what he most longs for. Compared to the “gain” of knowing and experiencing the risen Lord Jesus, he counts those other credentials as “rubbish” (and

even that translation is a euphemism for the “s”-word.) I can be fairly proud of the wading pool in my backyard if I’ve never stood on Big Corona and looked out over the Pacific Ocean. Paul had realized how silly it was for him to be proud of those trophies he had accumulated when some came from “the luck of the draw” and the rest came as accidents of fortune or gifts from God anyway. He realized they were fit only to be thrown to the dogs in the garbage heap when he saw how they kept him from entering into loving relationship with God in Christ. Our trophies cannot buy God’s love; they can only keep us away from humbly receiving His eternal mercy as a free gift.

This is the Good News (or the bad news) of the gospel: the accomplishments which have gotten many people this far—to the “here” in their lives—are the same things which will hinder people from getting “There.” It’s only common sense: I can’t take my money or my loved ones with me; my books and my comfortable chair and my old running shoes will end up with someone else; whatever I may have achieved was possible as a result of the qualities with which God the creator endowed me; my life itself was loaned me by One greater than I. One moment I am going to die: exactly what good will all those possessions achievements amount to from that day forward? (I don’t say this to scare anyone—the prospect of dying is far more good news than bad for all those in Christ—but I mention this only to provide a commonsense perspective. If we fast-forward ahead, we see there’s no percentage in clinging onto the things which can please us only for a time while they can keep us apart from God, from fully experiencing the love of God in Christ. We can experience relationship with His Holy Spirit by trusting in Him, never obligating Him.)

Even Mapquest will not give me directions to a destination I cannot identify. Paul became very clear where he wanted to be: living forever and ever in communion with the risen Christ whose glory and mercy he had experienced. Blinded in His heavenly Light, Paul had seen exactly how pathetic it was for him to be proud of his incidental and accidental qualities. How short-sighted he was to boast of achievements which now seemed so paltry and transitory—that is, soon enough it would all be toast anyway.)

When he “got” this, Paul was clear how to live, and why.

“To live is Christ, to die is gain.” [Phil 1:21]

“It’s no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me...” [Gal 2:20]

Whether we are beginners in the life of faith or “veterans,” our starting point is the same as Paul’s. We don’t need to pretend our accomplishments are as nothing. They are “as nothing” only in comparison to Something. We don’t pretend we think we are small and insignificant—we are each one of us a beloved child of God, “only a little lower than God.” We are only small in comparison to Someone infinite. We don’t throw up our hands and try to forfeit our responsibilities, or sink into self-pity. We do not simply accept the fact that we sometimes act like wimps instead of like lions. (How does that help our Lord?) We don’t give up because our faith is so small, because we so often feel powerless. Of course we will feel empty compared to the fullness of the Spirit so manifest in Jesus.

To begin to get There from here, we keep our attention on God. We spend time in His presence thru prayer. (We become like those with whom we spend time in relationship.) We ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom, for direction, for reassurance. I

acknowledge and embrace the vast difference between God and me, rather than try to rationalize it away or excuse it or ignore it. That difference, if I am honest, is enough to bring me to my knees, over and over again.

Of course we can never get There—on our own.

To admit this, however, is to begin the journey, to begin living in the Kingdom all over again. By the grace of God, He will get you from here to There.

Philippians 3:4-12

“...even though I, Paul, also have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else 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 born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, 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 Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own.)