

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
Preached during COVID-19 via Zoom

“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.”

I was scrolling through Facebook a couple of days ago. A college friend had posted her nine year old son's school picture. This isn't that strange; lots of folks do that. But in her post, she noted angrily that her school had chosen a photographer who as a matter of course ran the school photos through a touch up filter. So, think about that for a minute: nine year old kids are having their photos doctored to remove blemishes or imperfections. Imagine my friend's dismay when her child's freckles had been removed. It would seem that, in 2020, idealized image is the new god that we ought to be worshiping. This struck me as a tiny bit of evil creeping into our world.

St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians: “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.”

In other words, St. Paul spends his whole letter to the Philippians making the case that all of the things in his life: his education, his titles, his pedigree, his work--are nothing compared to what he has in following Christ. Put another way, St. Paul uses Jesus as the lens through which he sees his whole life.

And this is why the photoshopping of little kids bothers me so much. It seems like the world increasingly tries to tell us what are the things that matter and what are the things that we should focus on above others. And the world is wrong. Unblemished skin is not ultimately important. Stock portfolios are not ultimately important. Titles and prestige are not ultimately important. In the words of St. Paul,

all is considered loss because of Christ. The world is trying to tell us that it is important to curate perfectly-photographed children. The Gospel says that the children are already perfect because they are beloved by Christ. I would very much like to explain this to that photographer.

But what does Paul's vision look like out in the world? I think I saw a glimpse of it a few weeks ago. Some of you might remember Deacon Ned, who sat in the front row at St. Mark's. Ned was on oxygen and typically using some kind of walker, though he would usually smile and tell stories all through coffee hour. His health wasn't great, though his spirits were extraordinary. Before he died, I had the opportunity to visit his assisted living home, and we had several lovely conversations. He told me that he had been an attorney and had come from a family that valued education and the church. In his later years, he felt a call toward serving as a deacon and was ordained. He worked on a project as a deacon that continues to exist today. Ned was concerned that people living in the streets didn't have proper funerals, and so he worked tirelessly with a number of people from St. James parish to find a way to give dignity and reverence at the funerals of those whom society had thrown away. This indigent burial program is one of Ned's greatest legacies.

While this is of course a beautiful ministry — and a reminder to the rest of us to keep the needs of the poor and the disenfranchised front and center in our Christian faith — the part of the story that moved me to tears came after Ned had died. Ned requested that his earthly remains be laid in the same place as the homeless people that he had served faithfully. Ned, like Paul, counted his connection to Christ as the only rank, the only benefit that mattered to him. He was not laid in a fancy mausoleum. Instead his ashes were placed among those saints that he had advocated for in his ministry.

I think God is trying to talk to us in these difficult days. I think when the news is screaming about one more scandal, God is showing us a kid who is perfect just as he is and a deacon who continued his ministry even in his death. There are scriptures written all around us if we know how to read. The love and presence of

Christ cannot be muted by the noise on the airwaves — by petty kings or opportunistic photographers.

Listen to Paul. And remember that the part of you that is worth praise and accolades is the part of you that is close to Christ. I'm sure you are very accomplished in many other ways, but your value is most clear in the love that God has for you for simply drawing breath. And when you realize that value, it is very hard not to see it in others. Or in Paul's words: "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Amen.