

"Gains and Losses"

Rev. Peter Bynum
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If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I [Paul] have more: ⁵circumcised 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; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More 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 ⁹and 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. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not 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. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:4b-14)

If you were to create a list of the things that define you, what would be on that list? What words or labels would you use to describe who you are?

This past Thursday night, the participants in the "Listen to My Heart" conversation that was held in Davis Hall shared an exercise that asked this specific question. Each person was asked to list the five "aspects" of their identity that were most important to them. I will admit that it was not an easy assignment. I struggled a bit to rank the things that most define me as a person.

What would your list look like?

Would you start with your family identity? I am a Bynum or a Duggan, a Moore or a Hacker.

Would you include your national identity, saying that one of the things that most defines you is that you are an American?

Would you list your religious identity? "I am a Christian." "I am a Presbyterian." Or maybe, "I grew up a Baptist or a Catholic."

Would you mention your race or ethnicity? If we are white, maybe not. If we are part of the group accepted as dominant, we are less likely to use a label. But those of us who are not part of the dominant group are likely to include ethnicity in a statement about who we are: black, or African, Asian, Inuit, or Native American.

Today, you might also add your ideology, because it tends to determine so much these days: "I am a conservative." "I am a progressive or a libertarian." "I am a Democrat," or "I am a Republican."

We are also likely to add something about what we do -- be it a job, a passion, or some other activity that we see as defining: "I am a teacher, a lawyer, a nurse or a banker." "I am an activist, a mother, a caregiver to an aging parent, a Scoutmaster or a volunteer for CCM."

All of these things, we could say, add something to who we are. If our identity is a house, these are the major building blocks that make up that structure. If our identity is seen as an empty cup, these are the things that fill that cup up and make us who we really are. To use Paul's language, we see these things as "gains." We view these labels or circumstances as advantages -- things that

profit us.¹ We might say we are better off, for example, because of our parents who loved us, taught us, and gave us our name. We might be deeply thankful for the blessings of living in this country, where we have freedoms that many around the world do not. We might say that we are better people because the work we do is fulfilling and meaningful. In many ways, we find our confidence in these things, because they give us a framework for living.

Paul certainly understands this way of building an identity. He knows this lens and perspective very well, because he formed his identity that same way. “You want to know who I am?” he asked. “You want to know my list?” Well, here it is...

He starts with his religion: “I am a Jew who bore the mark of circumcision.” This is followed closely by his nation: “I am a member of the people of Israel.” His family was also a key source of identity (“I am from the tribe of Benjamin”) as was his ethnicity (“I am a Hebrew born of Hebrews”).

He then shifted to his party or ideology, because his identity as a Pharisee put him in very specific company. He felt a powerful association with a group of people who held particular views about the law, about the resurrection, about how to live a faithful life.

And he also felt defined by the things he did – his vocation and his work. Some of it was earnest and good: “I was someone who tried to be righteous and blameless under the law.” Some of it now embarrassed him deeply, because he had been “a persecutor of the church.”

Paul's identity, as far as he understood it and the world understood it, had been cobbled together with labels – some decided by birth, others chosen by him in his living.

But all of that changed when he met Christ.² In that moment, the old Saul became the new Paul, and his identity was forever changed. The core of who he was could no longer be defined with those labels. The source of his confidence had shifted. “*Whatever gains I had,*” Paul writes, *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...*

In other words, Paul's understanding of “gain” had radically shifted. The things that profited him, that gave him advantage, that truly made him who he was, were now being found somewhere else. His joy, his confidence, his identity and personhood were now rooted not in worldly labels, but in Jesus Christ.

The 1964 movie “Becket” tells the story of Thomas Becket, a friend and confidant of King Henry II. Serving as Lord Chancellor of England, Becket had been an enthusiastic participant in the debauchery of the king. He had, however, always been a part of the church. In his earlier years, he had even studied to be a deacon and had served in the house of the Archbishop of Canterbury. This was a time when relations between the church and the crown were growing very strained. The church did not support much of what the king was doing, and the king in turn was beginning to retaliate in some violent ways. So, when the old Archbishop died, Henry II saw a great opportunity. He would elevate his close friend and confidant, Thomas Becket, to the post. Now, instead of fighting with the Archbishop, they could go to pubs and brothels together instead. It would be a great gain for everyone concerned, especially Becket and the king.

¹ κέρδος (*kerdos*), Strong's Concordance #2771, <http://biblehub.com/greek/2771.htm>

² Rob Fringer, <http://www.aplainaccount.org/single-post/2016/03/07/Philippians-34b14>

The plan, however, went immediately awry. As soon as Becket was ordained and installed into the church, his sense of identity unexpectedly and radically changed. In one of the most powerful scenes of the movie, Becket, who is played amazingly by Richard Burton, is preparing himself to be elevated to Archbishop by "divesting" himself of all worldly possessions. The poor people of the town are called into the sanctuary, and Becket passes out to them, one by one, the material goods that had been his: clothes, shoes, linens, furniture and cash. His servants think he is crazy to give all this stuff away, but Becket forges ahead with a huge smile on his face. When all of it is gone, and the hall is empty, Becket looks up at the crucifix above the altar and says thoughtfully to a sculpture of Christ hanging on the cross: "You! You're the only one who knows what is really going on here! They all think this is hard. You're the only one who knows that I feel like I'm on a holiday... that I've never enjoyed myself so much in my whole life. You're the only one who knows how joyful this is... how easy it is."³

Despite everything he had, the honor of God became everything for Becket. The labels and pursuits that used to define him were left behind. Everything that he used to count as gain -- his titles, his houses, his power and his stuff -- he found all too easy to give away. He was easily willing to lose it all for the sake of Christ.

The same was true for Paul. What once was gain was now seen as loss, because those things had been taking energy and space away from the power of Christ in his life. The only pursuit, the only true gain, was to realize that he had been "found in Christ." This meant that his righteousness would no longer be found in his family, tribe, country, job or even his religion. It would not be a righteousness of his own, but instead 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," Paul says. "That is what I really want. That is the goal toward which I am pressing, *the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*" Anything else, Paul said, would be a distraction.

No one is asking you to do today what Becket did -- to give all of your possessions away to the poor, or to turn your back on family or country. But this scripture does press us with a question, and it is this: what does Christ *really* mean to us? Is this place -- Christ's church -- just another human building block in our human identity -- something that lines up dutifully and comfortably beside our family heritage, our nationality, our familiar practices of religion, or the jobs we do during the week? Or does this church, this calling, represent something more?

I want to believe -- in fact I do believe -- that we all want it to be more... that deep down we all want what Paul had... the confidence to truly commit ourselves, body and soul, to following Christ... to be all in with our time, our energy, our money and our hearts. Isn't that why we are here? Isn't it that we want what men like Paul and Thomas Becket have had -- men of faith who offered with generosity their full lives to God... men who, because they gave themselves generously to God, were able to experience the power, blessing and joy of God in much deeper ways than most of us ever do? It seems significant that everyone who has actually given of themselves in that way always says the same thing: that the act of giving all is nowhere near as hard as we think it is... that giving oneself wholly and completely to Christ and Christ's church, without reservation and qualification, is actually a joyful thing... and a remarkably easy thing.

This is Dedication Sunday, the day when we make our pledges of time, talent and resources for another year of ministry. I do not know what you may have written on your pledge card. I don't know how you came up with the number that is written on that card. I don't even know if you are

³ This interpretation of "Becket" was first heard in, and derives from, a talk by Tony Campolo at the October 1989 College Conference in Windy Gap, NC.

planning to turn in a card this year. But I am not exaggerating when I say that the promise and pledge that we make to God on our cards this year could be a Thomas Becket moment. It could be a statement that we make in our hearts to the living Christ... a commitment that we are ready to find our true identities not in all those human labels that are so easy for the world to give us, but instead to be "found in Christ."

May we say with Paul, and with faithful servants of God like Thomas Becket, that we truly want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection... and forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, may we, like them, "*press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*"

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**