

### **Sermon, 25 May 2008—Proper 3**

Isaiah 49:8-16; Psalm 131; I Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34

Our dear older brother Paul was the first one to write about discovering what it is to be a follower of Christ. He tore down his old home, everything he had treasured, all of it consigned to trash, so that he could build up a new construction. He plowed his former existence under as he broke this new ground. Because Paul had neither known nor followed Jesus, and had even persecuted his disciples, the old had to go. A few tidy self-controlling adjustments of bad habits would not be enough. Paul's demolishing moment, in which he came to know Christ's risen life directly, with all his power and love, brought home to Paul that such immediate participation in the gift of the life of God could happen to anyone; one did not need to be Jewish to receive it, one did not even have to be an admirer or student of Jesus.

But with this utter overturning of everything he had considered true before, Paul would naturally wonder, how then should he live as a new person? Everything he had prized and relied on before, which, if he were honest, had been to him a source of unhappiness and heaviness and hatred, could no longer work, because it was shown to be insufficient to produce joy and new life. So Paul went to work taking himself apart, burning himself up, melting himself down, so that nothing stood in the way of the new creation he had become because of this direct knowledge of Christ, crucified and risen.

Paul is terrifying, because his scouting out the depths of God has taken him so far out ahead of us, that we can hardly make out his words as he calls back to us what he is discovering—like someone far below ground in a cave, calling back the sights and tight turns—and we wonder how anyone could go that far. Even the fragments of Paul we *can* understand, we would rather think

are uniquely his own because of his extraordinary spiritual gifts, not applicable to us—and so we conspire with our own stunted growth. We shudder whenever we think he is asking us to follow him into those depths—which he does ask and does expect: we are to imitate him as he imitates Christ.

In today's passage, he is talking about accountability. He now belongs to Christ as a slave belongs. There is no alternative life for him, unless his owner makes it possible. But for Paul, this does not produce a feeling of abjection or humiliation and despair. Instead, it has turned his self-destruction into self-offering, his rage into purpose, his torment into peace. There is finally nothing else to strive for, nothing else to achieve, nothing else to be, but the slave of Jesus, who has become what now lives in him.

Paul does not see this as a limitation at all. His new role is that of the steward, in charge of the innermost secrets of the household. The great good things God has set aside for us, which we could not have known ahead of time—what Paul calls the mysteries of God—Paul is to administer and distribute generously and carefully and lovingly. What are these mysteries? That God has chosen what is weak and simple to confound the strong and wise. That God dwells in us, the hope of glory. That God has made no distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, but made all one in Christ. These are the innermost secrets, stored in the depths of God's treasure chambers, and Paul says it is his obligation to bring them out and to place them in order and to present them on God's behalf, as a good and faithful steward must serve his master's honored guests out of his master's best. And we, you and I and every human person and every living thing, are God's honored guests in this life. God wishes to delight you and me and every human person and every living thing by showing how each of us can become the best version of

our self, the self God has intended us to be at our creation, so that we become the best of God's treasures given to each other as God's beloved friends.

So Paul says, I am Christ's slave, but an honored slave: the steward of God's mysteries—and in this he imitates Christ. Christ is preeminently the one who distributes God's grace, but Paul can imitate him and distribute God's grace to the full extent of his capacity, and from the depths of God, beyond where we can see or understand him, Paul calls out to us, “imitate me as I imitate Christ: become totally owned by Jesus so that Jesus' project of making God's grace known is what you do, not as the creator of that grace, but as its manager and distributor, as its steward.”

This, dear sisters and brothers, is what stewardship truly is: we are to redistribute effectively all that God has given us. This redistribution is to take place so that the innermost secrets of God are known and lived as widely as possible. These are the innermost secrets: God makes us one, God undermines the self-sufficient, God dwells in us, God advocates for the powerless, God cares for us, God adopts our orphaned selves, lonely and frightened, so that we become citizens of heaven, heirs of God's household, children of the Trinity, vigorous unstoppable ineradicable snow-defeating cement-cracking green shoots of resurrection wherever we are planted by the One who loves us and who plans better things for us than we can ask or imagine.

Paul adds, of course, that what matters about stewards is that they be found trustworthy. What a striking way to look at our own stewardship: what matters is not generosity, but trustworthiness. It is not how much, but how, you offer what God has entrusted to you. It is not the amount of time or the level of skill, but the steadiness, the commitment, the reliability. That is what matters, Paul says, in a steward. Can we, as stewards, be trusted, meaning, can we be relied on? Can we be trusted to act on God's behalf? And in this case, can we

be relied on to make the distribution of God's Good News? That God loves us seems to remain for most people an impenetrable secret—let alone knowing how God dwells in us in order to overturn our self-reliance and call into question all we believe ourselves to be. But we are stewards of these very mysteries, the secrets God is eager to whisper into our ears. Can those around us know that they can repose their confidence in us, in our steadiness to put God's intentions first? And what are those intentions, if not restoration and forgiveness and joy in creation and the full knowledge of God's love and encouragement of what God has created? And more than anything else, can we, as stewards, be the constant distribution center of the knowledge that God neither condemns nor abandons Creation, but remains faithful and present to us, in us, as us?

Paul then makes one of those exasperating statements that cause those who despise him to say that he is the most prideful being after Lucifer and those who admire him to say that is the most humble being after Jesus. Paul knows that his standards for stewardship are impossibly high, and he has called himself God's steward. Who is going to judge if he has met those standards or not? Is he himself trustworthy as a steward?

He says the only thing that can be truly said. He simply cannot be concerned with human judgment, theirs, ours, or even his own. There will always be those who despise and those who admire and those who self-justify. He must set human perspectives and determinations aside, even his own. He knows that his own addiction to righteousness, which caused him to crash and burn, is no friend of happiness, impartiality, or even sanity. In fact, his obsession with goodness has the potential of distorting everything he looks at, so he says, "I don't even judge myself"—not because he is above judgment, but because he is slave and steward, not master and owner. He cannot be judged by

human standards, not because he is on the bench, or even above the bench, but because he is already in the dock, on trial where God alone is judge—and another court, especially no self-appointed human court, cannot interrupt this process. He knows he is not acting on his own behalf, under his own power, for his own purposes; so he himself cannot judge himself, because neither his goals nor his standards are set by him, but by God. He cannot know the perspective from which God judges, and God alone is the judge. What he does know is that God has the sole power of being able to bring to light what is hidden in darkness, and even to disclose the purposes of the human heart—and from that perspective, God alone is qualified to be judge.

Of course, this is very good news for us, because what God does when God judges is affirm what is true about us. God exposes and names that stash in our darkness and the self-frustrating and confused purposes of our heart. God is the only one who can bring light to bear on what torments us and drives us, to disentangle what hobbles us, to illuminate what confuses us. God alone has a handle on all these things we half grasp—and we only half grasp them because they have a stranglehold on us, and it is the pain of their fixed grip that cause us to judge ourselves and others so harshly. Thank God Paul accepts no human judgment, not even his own. Thank God Paul recommends that we imitate him as he imitates Christ, who also was not bound by any human judgment.

Now, the only person you are guaranteed to be with all the time—and if you believe in eternity, all of eternity—is yourself. Better begin to get to know yourself now, because it will be a shock to wake up next to yourself forever, especially if you do not care for what you believe yourself to be. This God who brings to light what is hidden in darkness, who can disclose the purposes of your heart, is the greatest ally and friend you have in this effort.

Remember Paul's words: God's secrets have already been disclosed, what is hidden in God's darkness has already been brought to light, God's purposes have already been made known—all this in the eyes and hands and words and acts of Jesus the Christ. And when Paul came to know Christ, Paul found himself delivered into those same intentions to the point of being bound to them as a slave is bound to a master, but not in huddled literal frightened obedience, but exalted as a steward of the mysteries of God for all the scattered members of God's household. If the deep secrets of God are not condemnation, but reconciliation, not contempt, but comfort, not wrath, but strength, how can the deep secrets of God's creatures be any different than their Creator? To know ourselves as God knows us is to discover our partnership with God, the stewardship of all God has entrusted to us.

The only thing that can disrupt this, because God is so respectful of us, is our rejection of this offer, our marginalization of it, our compartmentalization of it, our dismissal of it, our walking away from it—our finding, in other words, that we believe we have better things to do with our life than give it over to the secrets of God. We can believe that such gifts are foolishness, that we would be fools to imitate Paul, who was a fool to imitate Christ, who was the foolishness of God. But here, while we have been given to each other, let's not turn from each other, but think of each other as slaves of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries to each other, and strive to be found trustworthy by each other and by God, until the One who is our faithfulness, fulfills his own faithfulness, and all that is in darkness in us is brought into the light of the glorious Trinity, Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, One God, whom we trust we will find it is the purpose of our heart to praise for all eternity.