**Philippians 3:4b-14 April 3, 2022**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Epistle lesson, Philippians 3 here re-reading these words. “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There was no Pharisee of the Year award, but if there was, there’s no doubt Paul would have won it. Listen to this list of accolades in our Epistle lesson! “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” And that’s the thing about accolades, the list can be found by others on resumes or some other source, but Paul shows the most reliable place to find out about someone’s awards, accomplishments, and accolades. Right here. In your own head. You know, what you’ve done, that has garnered attention, and you know why you should be thought of, as a good person or as Paul has emphasized this morning, why he should be considered the very best among his peers and even in the eyes of God. So what does your list of accolades look like?

To give you another example, I can tell you mine: I am the son of a Pastor and a Lutheran school teacher. Baptized and Confirmed in the Lutheran Church. I attended Lutheran schools my entire life from preschool through Graduate school. Lutheran Grade School, Lutheran High School, Concordia University Wisconsin, Concordia Theological Seminary. Thanks to playing the trumpet in instrumental band tours in High School and College I have been to Lutheran Churches all over the United States of America from New York to California, from Minnesota to Texas and everywhere in between. I took the straightest path to becoming a pastor and was ordained in 2013 when I was only 26 years old.

So again I ask you, what does your list look like? How long have you lived in Manistee County? How long have you worked at your job? Have you won any specific awards? You can think of it in terms of what would you write about in your autobiography, or what is significant enough to be included in your Obituary? What is the stuff that people will remember about you that is important, that meant a lot, that others would recognize as impressive? Certainly you have a list in your head, something that is significant in your faith, in your life, in your family. (Take what’s going on this morning as an example. These girls are coming forward to be examined in their faith, and being Confirmed is an accomplishment. They know the faith, and you’ll see it on full display. But knowledge without application is meaningless, and awards are themselves, pointless in the overall picture of our salvation.)

Paul makes reference to his list of accolades and awards, all the reasons why he should be considered great, or even the greatest Pharisee who ever lived, and then it’s as if he sets the list on fire. It’s like he had all of it up on a screen for everyone to see, and he deletes it all. None of it matters, as a matter of fact he can even look at all of these things that matter so much to the Jewish people, all of these things that his whole life he clung to and patted himself on the back about, and I’m sure brought up in every conversation with other religious leaders and scribes and Pharisees, how he bragged about being of the tribe of Benjamin, or how he even would brag about persecuting followers of Jesus Christ, and he wraps it all up, ties a rock to it and throws it into the Lake. “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish.” Compared to Jesus Christ and knowing him, they don’t mean anything at all.

My own list is the same way, my service to the church, the occupations and callings of my parents serving in the church, my upbringing and background in the Lutheran Church, in the grand scheme of things, means absolutely nothing. That list goes in the fire, right next to Paul’s. And guess which list goes too? Yours. That secret list in your own mind of the things you’ve done to garner the good graces of God. That list of awards and good things you’ve done and that you hang your hat on, the faith of your parents, the money you gave to support a project or ministry, the time you gave to volunteer at something or your faithful service on a board of the church or in some other capacity, all of the things that you think about when you are faced with your sin, and that you use to justify yourself before God, (even something like standing up before the church and being examined and telling everyone why you want to be confirmed and the faith in your heart and what Confirmation means to you), all of the stuff that you think is important and that you think earns you a place in heaven, goes away. It is rubbish as Paul calls it. Solomon calls chasing after the awards, the money, the fame, the important things of this world, “Meaningless” in Ecclesiastes, “Vanity of Vanities.” In comparison to Christ none of it’s important at all.

Because you won’t find peace in your own accomplishments. The Law only demands more. The Beast is never satisfied, it’s hunger continues on forever. Your works are never enough, because you could have and should have done more. Martin Luther, a man who had all the accolades and awards of being the greatest Monk just as Paul was the greatest Pharisee, talks about this truth in these words, “What, then, are we to do when the Law constantly demands and drives us on, and, after all, we cannot keep it? For my conscience is ever judging me. I tell myself: Because I should love God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself, and after all I cannot do so, I must be damned; and God says yes and confirms the judgment. Who will help me in this predicament? Says the Law: I know of no way to help you. The Law simply desires and requires you to be obedient.” Here Luther illustrates the struggle of leaning on your own accomplishments, accolades, or thinking that your own works will save you. Your conscience deceives you, and you can think only of the good you should have done. God himself has set the standard of perfection in order to be in fellowship with him, so when you say that you are a sinner he agrees, and when you say that your sin leads to your own condemnation you are right. The Law won’t help you, because it shows you your sin, there is no peace from the guilt you experience, and your awards and accolades and accomplishments give no peace because there are always more you could have won, and more you could done.

They are all rubbish, garbage, meaningless in comparison to Jesus Christ, the remedy, the answer, the solution to the problem of sin. Salvation comes from outside of us, not inside, it comes from the work of Jesus, rather than ourselves. Paul writes, “That I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” Your salvation is found only in the dependance on Jesus Christ for it to be accomplished, nothing else will do. It’s not a half and half arrangement, it’s not that you don’t have to be the best but you still need to be good and do a few things or even one thing for your salvation. (Confirmation doesn’t save you, it’s simply a reaffirmation of what was done for you when you were baptized. While it is an accomplishment in your spiritual life it isn’t some kind of badge that you get to wear that shows your own deeds and awards that earns or merits you anything in the eyes of God. )

What Paul is talking about, what we ourselves learn when we truly examine our hearts and see the wonderful love of Jesus Christ, who dies on the cross for us in our place on account of our sin and saves us from ourselves and our selfish pride and ego, who saves us from believing we can save ourselves, is illustrated in the words of the hymn, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.” In verse 5 we sing these words, “Sinners whose love can ne’er forget the wormwood and the gall, go spread your trophies at his feet and crown him Lord of all.” The trophies of life, everything you’ve done, is laid at the foot of the cross, in the shadow of His sacrifice, that we may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. Those words are found in the Meaning of the 2nd Article of the Creed, something you learn when you are confirmed, but that knowledge doesn’t merit you anything on it’s own, memorizing the catechism, being confirmed, living your whole life in the church, serving the Lord faithfully, all of the accolades on our lists, we lay at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, our Savior, the one who died so that we would live and who rose to give us eternal life. May we always and only boast in the work of our Savior.

I leave you with a quote of Martin Luther, who spoke not only of the Law and it’s apathy toward your need of salvation, but also of the grace of God. “For God indeed gives to some many good things and richly adorns them, as He did Lucifer in heaven. He scatters His gifts broadcast among the multitude; but He does not therefore regard them. His good things are merely gifts, which last for a season; but His grace and regard are the inheritance that lasts forever….” Burn the lists, and receive the undeserved love of God given through the work of His Son who did all the work for you.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.