

17 March 2019

Philippians 3:17-4:1 (Peterson) Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times, sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites.

But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven! We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him.

My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God.

"I'm Off and Running and I'm Not turning Back"

Introduction: Here we are in the middle of Lent, a time of reflection and personal penance, but the common lectionary chooses Paul to remind us of the attractions of Easy Street for those who hate Christ's Cross. Who does not occasionally yearn for life on Easy Street? A life of indulgence and self satisfaction. An extra bit of chocolate here, another glass of good wine there. A deep breath of contentment and a feeling of invincibility. It takes Peterson's colorful translation to really catch Paul's disdain for Easy Street where those who live there "make their bellies their gods and belches are their praise." He reminds us that Easy Street is a "dead-end street." And that we need to "steer clear of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite who are only interested in appearances."

Christ's Cross: Paul tells us that "I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward – to Jesus." In short, we Christians must not "hate Christ's Cross," rather we must embrace the Cross. As we embrace it, our actions change the very nature of the Cross. Let us spend a few moments considering how Christ changed the Cross for all time.

From Despair to Hope: One can only dimly imagine what the cross must have meant to the people of the time. What a slow, gruesome and public way to die. Deliberately designed to be as degrading as possible. Utter despair must have been the dominant emotion for the condemned. Even Jesus, fully realizing his man-nature, says "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" But during the ordeal He also says "truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus learned that God does not forsake us, especially in our extremity. Out of the deepest despair or simply out of disappointment, we know that God is near and that hope is ever present. The Cross was changed from a symbol of despair to one of hope. It is the hope of the Cross that should occupy much of our attention during Lent. It is easy to look about us and to become so immersed in the injustices, this "squalid and polluted society" as Paul calls it, that we forget hope and that hope was born of the Cross.

From Hate to Love: The hatred of the people who condemned Jesus to death, both the mob and the officials, was turned to love as Jesus spoke these words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The command to love, which Jesus made often in His ministry, He fulfilled on the Cross. It is the single command which most of us probably find most difficult to obey. This focus on Love became world transforming. "Love your neighbor as yourself" – and the whole world is our

neighbor. During some times in our life journey, it may be easier to love our neighbor than to love ourselves! But the forgiveness we extend to others, we must also extend to ourselves. The burden of things done or left undone, need not weigh upon us. If God could forgive His murderers, He surely meant for us to forgive ourselves! Sometimes we use our past as an excuse to take no action in the here and now. That is certainly NOT the Christian application of Love. Christ's Love liberates us to move forward. It is a ladder for climbing to new heights, not a chain to tie us to hate, not even to self-hate, especially not to self-hate. In His act of forgiveness, Jesus created love flowing from the Cross. The Cross is now a symbol of Love.

From Sadness to Joy: The Cross also transformed sadness into Joy. The sadness of the Cross is self-evident. For the Joy of the Cross, the disciples needed to await the resurrection. But what they had to wait for, we have now. As Paul said, in the same chapter our text is from, "Be glad in God!" The blood and guts, fear and revenge of the Old Testament has been supplanted by the New Covenant: That is a covenant of love producing joy! Hell-fire and damnation, judgement and ostracism may be part of Christian history. It is not part of New Testament Love which does, indeed, conquer all. A hymn that we don't sing often enough is "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." This is not just a pious sentiment – it should be the description of our lives. Whether in the joy of a new birth or the mourning of an old friend, adoring Jesus with joy should be our life journey's theme music.

From Shame to Salvation: In ancient times the cross was a sign of shame. After the crucifixion of Jesus, to Christians, it became the symbol of salvation. Narrowly interpreted this meant the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But salvation is so much more than that! Our salvation is our life of hope, love and joy. If we become fixated on eternal life, we deny ourselves the pleasure we have as living members of the Kingdom of God in the present. We are living our salvation.

Conclusion: As we continue our trip through Lent, let us remember the transformative power of the Cross to build hope, create love, bring joy and embrace salvation: Paul said it best: "I'm off and running and I'm not turning back." Amen