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October 8, 2023

Our Saviour/St. Stephen's
Pentecost 19

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, I don't know about you, but in middle school, in the school district where I grew up, we, my fellow classmates and I, were required to take a foreign language.

And, we had the option of taking French, Spanish, or German.

And of those three languages, I chose German.

I can't remember why I gravitated to German, perhaps because of my family's German heritage.

Now, taking a foreign language in school was something of a novelty for my friends and me.

For, of course, we had our core subjects: Math, Science, English, and History.

And as a student, one really didn't have much say, much choice about those subjects.

But when it came to the foreign language requirement, at least we had say about what language we wanted to study.

We could actually choose what language we wanted to learn.

So, yes, it was something of a novelty.

And so, in middle school, I began to study the German language.

And I remember that some of the first words my friends and I learned outside the classroom...

Some of the first words, my friends and I, researched on our own apart from what were learning from our teacher...

Some of the first words we investigated were the expletives, the swear words, in German.

For whatever the reason, that always seems to be of at least some interest for anyone learning a new language.

All the more, it grabbed the interest of idiotic dunderheads, like my friends and me, in middle school.

And so, yes, I can swear in German, although, I really have never found the great need nor desire to do so.

Now, why do I bring all this up?

Because today, in our reading from Philippians, we have a swear word. (Put hand to one's mouth.)

We have a curse word, an expletive, a no-no word.

That should grab our attention, right? That should make us pick up our bulletin and begin perusing through the second lesson again.

Yes, here in our reading, the apostle Paul, himself, uses profanity. (Again, put hand to one's mouth.)

And I imagine this may be new to our ears.

We probably didn't stop to consider that there were curse words in ancient Greek, did we?

This after all is the language of the divine word.

And, furthermore, we probably didn't ever think that one of those curse words would find its way into the Bible.

Surprise!

Actually, sisters and brothers in Christ, we would probably be stunned to realize what else is contained in the Bible.

In particular, there are some really raunchy sections in the Bible but we won't get into that now.

Suffice it to say, in some places in the Bible, there should definitely be an R-rating.

PAUSE

But getting back to our text at hand, where does this profanity appear in our reading from Philippians?

For if we read through the passage again, there is no visible profanity we can see.

That is because the translator, the one who took the original Greek and translated it into English for us, cleans up the original text.

But, the word is found in Philippians chapter 3, verse 8.

It is the word that is translated here in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible as “rubbish.”

Other English translations use different terms.

The New International Version of the Bible, for instance, translates the word as “garbage.”

The American Standard Version of the Bible translates the word as “refuse.”

The Common English Bible translates the word as “sewer trash.”

And the King James Version translates the word as “dung.”

Now the Greek word that appears in Philippians 3:8 is the word *skubala*.

And it appears only here in the New Testament. Nowhere else in the NT does this word show up.

And, the word *skubala* means “dung,” or “sewer trash,” or “sewer waste,” but it is equivalent to the more offensive term that gets thrown around in our English language.

And again, as I noted, in all of Paul’s writings, in all of the writings in the NT, this word appears but once, right here.

PAUSE

And so, the question begs to be asked, “Why?”

Why does Paul use it? Did Paul have a “potty mouth”?

Did Paul go around cursing in his everyday life?

When he was interacting with persons while tending to his tent-making trade, did he casually swear? Who knows?

Personally, I believe that Paul was one of the greatest of wordsmiths to have ever lived, and thus he was particularly careful about his choice of words at any given time.

Indeed, Paul was incredibly adept at using words to convey the Christian message, specifically his (Paul's) interpretation of the Christian message.

He was a remarkable wordsmith, and he greatly influenced others by his words—his words are golden.

Which is why the nearly half of the writings in the NT are either indisputably written by Paul, or if not written by Paul himself, even though attributed to him, were greatly influenced by Paul's teachings.

Indeed, 13 of 27 writings in the NT are attributed to Paul. The early church when forming the NT collected together many of Paul's writings to include them in the Scripture—his words were golden.

And as one who was incredible adept at using words, Paul gave the Roman Empire a makeover for the early Christians.

Yes, Paul used the words of the Roman culture of his day—words like grace, peace, Father, Lord, gospel, faith, etc. ...

Words that had one meaning, often in relation to the Roman Emperor and the Roman Empire at-large...

Paul used the words of the Roman culture of his day but infused those words with new meaning so as to speak NOT of the Emperor and the Roman Empire, but instead to speak of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God.

Words have power, you see, to create a reality in which we move, and live, and have our being.

And our reality can be changed, can be re-imagined, re-envisioned, by re-interpreting the words we use in common parlance.

This is what Paul did.

As an adept wordsmith, Paul refashioned, re-made the reality in which early Christians found themselves in the world.

And it proved to be truly life-altering, revolutionary, reality-shattering, however you want to classify it.

PAUSE

So, when we look at this word *skubala* in our text today from Philippians, there is no doubt an intentionality behind its usage here.

No, Paul probably didn't go around cursing up a storm as he went about his daily life.

No, Paul was selective about the words he used, because he knew the power words have.

And so, Paul probably means to grab the attention of his audience, to whom he is writing here.

Much in the same way, my mention of this curse word in the text, grabbed our attention today.

And what then does Paul want to say by grabbing our attention here?

That on the whole when we weigh the things of importance in the world, they are nothing compared to the importance of Christ.

And Paul runs through what the world (particularly the Jewish world) might see as important in himself—

...that Paul is member of people of Israel (God's chosen people in the OT)

...that Paul is of the tribe of Benjamin (the same tribe from where the first king of Israel emerged)...

...that Paul is astute in the law, that is a Pharisee...

...Paul is zealous and righteous, he is blameless under the law...

And, Paul could go on. He was also a freeman in Roman society. He was a Roman citizen and so had certain privileges, a certain status, that many others did not in the Roman Empire.

Status was of huge importance in the Roman world.

Think of the proverbial social ladder, where one aspires to rise in rank and status in our world and you get a sense of Roman life, too.

But, Paul here is saying that all sense of status, and the many other things we give importance to, whether we are speaking of those things in the Jewish tradition or Roman culture, all things are *skubala* compared to Christ.

He says, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ as my Lord."

PAUSE

But this then is where the rubber meets the road, as they say.

Because Paul, in his boundless faith, could chuck everything aside, he was able to consider everything as loss, and rely solely in Jesus Christ.

But what about we Christians in this day and age?

What about we Christians who have to worry about "important" things, things like our retirement plans, if we will have enough to live on?

What about we Christians who worry about our status at work or at school?

What about we Christians who cling to this secular, earthly reality in which we live, and move, and have our being?

How would we ever let go of the world in which we find ourselves and rely like Paul solely on faith in Christ?

Is everything we really cling to, and consider "important" in life...is all the trappings of life we give so much time and energy to, is that really all *skubala*? Can we consider it all as loss?

PAUSE

This is not an easy text for us to embrace.

But what I find Paul saying in not so many words is that when we let go, we let God...

...when we give up, relinquish, and let go at least some of the control we think we have, and of that which we think so important, it is then that we actually become

more aware, more attuned, more responsive to the grace of God in Jesus Christ at work in us, and through us, and all around us.

And I have thinking a lot about this as of late, particularly as my brothers and I have been trying to work with my aging parents.

You see, my parents have reached that stage where they are facing the loss of some of their independence.

They still live in their home, but they really shouldn't be driving anymore.

And this reality is really upending their world, as it does for so many seniors.

But, the truth that I am beginning to see in all of this is that grace comes to make itself ever more apparent when we aren't so bent on holding onto to control, or holding onto what we think is important.

But letting go of control, of what we think is so important, is again by no means easy. It is by no means comfortable.

Letting go often means venturing out into the scary unknown.

And letting go may lead to some or many aspects of our life dying, but then, and only then, can there be resurrection.

Only then can a new reality break in that is truly life giving.

And I wonder sometimes then if one of the greatest obstacles to true and deep faith in God in our present society...

Yes, I wonder if perhaps the greatest obstacle to sincere and enduring faith is all the control we have laid down on our human life, and all the importance we give to certain things.

Climate control in our homes and in our cars.

Home insurance, health insurance, car insurance, life insurance, to give us some sense of control when disaster strikes.

Calendars, and schedules, and date books to control our time.

Human society and technology over the ages has striven immensely to give human beings the illusion that we have control.

And don't get me wrong, many of these things are good and necessary.

But in the process, we have removed the need to trust in God.

And so what happens to grace, or to say it another way, what happens to seeing the hand of God at work in life? It all but vanishes.

And thus we need texts like our lesson from Philippians today, to remind us that Christ alone is the sure foundation.

When all other control goes away, Christ is still there to give us his grace and his peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.