

Sermon by Joseph McGarry –

Preached at St. Paul's Lutheran Church Red Hill, PA on March 25, 2007

Philippians 3:4-14

4Even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I 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.

There's a new wave of crime in the U.K, and all across Europe, it is costing millions of dollars to control.

It's a crime that threatens public health and safety everywhere from subways to street corners; the police are doing their best looking for the perpetrators. Awareness campaigns have been launched with billboards calling for the public to ban together and clean up the streets.

It all has to do with chewing gum.

Thousands upon thousands of people have been taking their chewed up, flavorless gum and have been spitting it onto the sidewalks of London. As they do other non-expecting patrons accidentally step in the gum and get it on their shoes. Or even worse, the gum dries and hardens on the sidewalk leaving a colored disk on the street.

The issue may run deeper than just common sense and courtesy. Rather than make the effort to throw away the old flavorless gum --most people think that their convenience is more important than the sensibilities of the rest of us. They leave their marks of self-interest out there in the open for everyone else to step.

So how does this affect us?

The same situation occurs *when we don't properly deal with the stuff that sticks to us from our own pasts* — those emotions, actions, memories, sins and failures that turn blacker and stickier the longer we let them go they begin to affect us and everyone around us.

However we can dispose the current gum that we are eating and we can get a fresh piece through our faith in Jesus.

In today's reading -- We are meeting the passionate side of Paul. It is Paul who urges us to properly dispose of our flavorless pasts and head toward a new future made possible by our relationship with Christ.

Paul admitted the he thought he had a good life. He was given all the breaks in the world. He thought that he had it all figured out--- until he really go to know Christ.

He considered his former life “blameless” and to whom no accusations would stick. Paul recognized that he had spent much of his life simply chewing on his successes instead of trying a new flavor of life —a life with Jesus.

This new flavor is what changes everything for Paul. Once Paul got to know God and the power of his resurrection things changed for Paul.

It's not knowledge *about* God but a vital personal relationship *with* God that Paul wants to promote to the Philippians — a relationship that requires giving something up in order to get something better. Paul saw himself as wrapping up and tossing aside his own “righteousness” which “comes from the law”— not that the law was invalid, but that the law on its own could not eliminate the black mark of sin or the stickiness of self-righteousness. Without some outside intervention, a life dependent on one's abilities to live up to the requirements of law would result in a constant cycle of one's spirit being chewed up and spit out by failure over and over again.

For Paul the only solution for moving on with his life is Christ. The best way of living through “faith” is the righteousness of God demonstrated through the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. Paul had already told the Philippians that Christ was to be their primary example — an example that Paul wanted to follow. As Christ's death led to resurrection, so will dying to self in the present life of his disciples lead to a transformed life both in the present and in the age to come.

Paul was quick to admit that he hadn't yet experienced the fullness of that resurrection life. Unlike his former life, which had been characterized as “blameless,” Paul now realized that perfection was not determined by what he did or failed to do as much as by whom he knew --- Paul had his mind on a goal of a new direction. Wrapping up the past and depositing it in the appropriate bin, Paul was now “straining forward to what lies ahead” which included a life with Christ.

Paul understood clearly that following Christ and becoming more like him involved proper disposal of old ways of living — We don't let our past failures or successes stick around for others to see, we do not want to keep stepping on them continually ourselves. The past is past, wadded up and replaced by a new flavor that will never lose its taste — that is Jesus.

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