

Life Turned Upside Right

From the Lenten sermon series: The Way to Life

Text: Philippians 3: 10-11

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

All I care for is to know Christ. To experience the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings, in growing conformity with his death... Philippians 3:10-11

Revolution or Transformation in human life or historical institutions is often described as things being turned upside down. But something that is turned upside down would seem to be other than in its native, true position or situation. Therefore, this message is entitled "Life Turned Upside Right" because, while we point to a radical transformation of human personality - specifically the Transformation of the Apostle Paul, we are pointing to a new human condition which is not contrary to nature, but rather the restoration of human nature according to the intention of Creation.

Therefore, I point you this morning to the call to human transformation, which is really a call to realize God's intention for us, that we live not out of our own resources, but wholly out of His grace. Paul expresses the goal of his life following his encounter with Jesus Christ and finding his life turned upside right as caring only

...to know Christ. To experience the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings, in growing conformity with his death, if only I may finally arrive at the resurrection from the dead.

The Apostle stands as the great example of radical conversion in the New Testament. Sometimes that very fact creates a distance from many of us who have grown up, nurtured in the faith from our earliest years. We have never known that wrenching from death to life, from darkness to light. We have grown up within the covenant of Grace of which our baptism is a sign; we have never known a time when we did not know about God, a time of not knowing Him, and

we have never known a time when we did not in some fashion trust in God. How, then, can the experience of a Paul be relevant for us within the nurture of the Church?

Let us reflect on that for a moment. Was Paul's situation so different from ours? Is he really an example of radical conversion from darkness to light, from death to life, and thus without instruction for the Church situation? Certainly there was radical change; certainly there was deep existential encounter; certainly there was the sense of moving from darkness to light, from death to life.

But in what context did that radical transformation occur? Was it not precisely within the context of the Covenant of Grace? Was it not precisely within the context of the community of faith?

Did Paul find in the face of Jesus some new God? Not at all. Did Paul move from atheism or agnosticism or blasé indifference to faith and zeal? Not at all.

What, then, was the radical change? How, then, was life turned upside right? If it was not from world to Church, from non-belief to faith, from indifference to commitment, wherein lay the transformation?

The Scripture passage gives a clear answer: The radical change was the movement from securing one's life by one's own efforts, to finding one's life secured by the grace of God. The radical change was from doing, to trusting. The radical change was from living by the "performance principle," to living by the Grace principle.

In my wrestling with this familiar testimony of the Apostle, I was suddenly struck with the total relevance of Paul's experience for us, for the People of God in the Church. This is a message precisely for us who are religious, who know the truth and live within the community of faith. Is it not precisely we in the Church who need to be converted? Is it not we who must be called again from all self-securing performance and all reliance on our fine accomplishments or religious activity, even zeal for the Kingdom and reminded that life is gift and all is of sheer grace? Is it not ourselves, serious, diligent, faithful, who need more than others to be pointed to grace as our only hope and salvation?

Paul's God was the God of Israel; the God of Israel was the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's Bible was the Torah, the Old Testament which pointed to the way of life. Paul's community was the Covenant Community, Israel, of which the Church is the continuation.

All that was true of Paul was positive. Listen to his own recitation of who he was and the seriousness with which he lived.

...If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of

Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, blameless. Philippians 3: 4b-6

Was that all bad? No. On the contrary, that was all good; it spoke of both high privilege and conscientious responsibility. What, then, was the fatal flaw of the old Paul?

Simply that all of that which he cited was the ground of his confidence; his righteousness was a self-righteousness; the principle of his life was the performance principle. He sought to secure his existence, to secure his life, his acceptance with God and his reputation with his neighbors by his racial lineage, his religious affiliation, his record of service and diligence of dedication. Paul simply trusted in Paul.

But not really. We are never finished when we are doing it ourselves; there is always one more thing to do, one more base to cover, a little more exertion to expend. And then there is also always the fear that somewhere, sometime we might slip, we might fall, we might lose our grip, grow weary, cynical or indifferent and, if it all depends on our performance, where will that leave us? Legal rectitude and zeal - that was it for Paul.

The Greeks, he writes in another place, seek after wisdom - a rational explanation of reality into which they can fit their existence and in which they can find themselves within the structure of reality. And there are other possibilities - Hedonism, perhaps - just living for pleasure, keeping the engines of our being fired up with one titillating experience after another - and so on.

But Paul's life was turned upside right - radically, that is, the very core of his being was transformed. He moved, not to a new God, a new People; he moved to a new basis upon which to place his life - God's grace - apart from his background, affiliations or performance. Listen to his own statement:

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 refuse, in order that I may gain Christ... Philippians 3: 7-9

That is a radical conversion.

But not as we often think of radical conversion as turning from atheism or agnosticism to God; from the world to the Church; from non-religious practice to serious religious practice; from disobedience to obedience. No. This radical conversion happened within the being of a person serious about God, religious in practice, and totally dedicated to religious service.

It was a movement from trusting self-securing endeavor to trusting only the gracious God. It was a movement from seeking to justify one's existence to resting in the justification which is gift. It was a movement from compulsive drivenness that can never find peace, to rest and peace that frees one to live with vitality. It was a movement from humorless heaviness to joy and lightness of spirit.

But is not such a view of radical grace rather dangerous? Might it not lead to presumption, slackness, carelessness, frivolity? Let us simply note its effect on the Apostle.

...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death... Philippians 3:10

Power, courage to suffer for Jesus' sake, conformity finally to the death Jesus died in obedience to God's will for the sake of the world, all in the hope of final resurrection, life in his light forever.

Let me bring Paul's witness to our present situation - have you met Jesus and heard him say cease from all self-securing activity, which stems from insecurity and creates hostility?

"Rest in me."

Lent is a time to learn again obedience. Obedience is faith - resting in the gracious God. In the posture, life is turned upside right.

Amen.