

## A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*My God, My All*

Philippians 3.12

October 4, 2020

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says very plainly to the religious leaders, "Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." Jesus is the stone, rejected by the religious leaders. He has become the cornerstone. He always was and always is the cornerstone on which everything else depends. Our lives are held together in him and by him.

This is the point of today's readings: Christ isn't just like one brick in your house. He's the house. He isn't like a bend in your river. He's the river and the water flowing. He isn't a just a plank on the dance floor. He's the floor and your dance partner and the music that fills the room.

The fullness of Christ's presence in our lives is so complete that we can say with Paul, "Christ has made me his own." Christ has apprehended me, taken hold of me. Everything else in our lives flows from this well-spring. Everything else is built on this cornerstone.

For St. Paul, this simple statement is the meaning of this life and the hope of heavenly life to come. And because of it, his whole life is now oriented around one desire: I want to know Christ. For Paul, knowing Christ, even here toward the end of his life, was still a hope that was in front of him. That's the paradox at the heart of our faith: the more we know Christ, the more we desire to know him. The more we know him, the more distant we can feel from true and full knowledge. It is only the one who plays at their faith who thinks that they have come close to knowing Christ fully.

*I want to know Christ*, he says. This desire fuels everything about his life and his ministry, his willingness to suffer and his joy in sharing the Gospel. He wants to know Christ and wants everyone else to know him, too.

The fullness of knowing Christ is so profound that this one life we are given, this fleeting time before we breathe our last isn't nearly enough. It's just not enough time. So, to hope to know Christ is to hope that there's more time. Paul prays to somehow attain the resurrection of the dead, somehow to receive the prize of the heavenly call. Heaven for Paul isn't a reward in and of itself; it means that there's more time. That there is something more than this life; there is more. Without that hope, Paul is left heartbroken at the grief of not having the opportunity to know Christ as fully as he desires. To have hope for life after death overcomes the veil of darkness of the grave in the light of the joy of knowing and being known by Christ.

This is a remarkable vision for life, death, and life after death. To desire to make Christ your own because Christ has made you his own is to desire to know him as you are fully known by

him. For that, one life just isn't enough. By the grace of God in the resurrection of Jesus, what begins here and now can continue on. We're converted, and we keep on being converted inch by inch, in this life and in the mystery of what is to come that we may know him.

This is what Paul means when he prays, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." We all do. We want this for ourselves and for others. Sometimes in life it's like we get a glimpse of this mystery, sometimes just a fleeting moment of transcendence in a prayer; or when you find yourself unexpectedly in some tremendous place, and it's totally silent and you're at peace; when a baby is born. Life has these moments of transcendence. Those moments are just the thinnest glimpse of what awaits us in our relationship with God.

We want this knowledge to grow in us now and continue to grow until our union with Christ is complete. Our eyes turn to the top of the mountain, to the cloud of unknowing, to the hope for *theosis*. This is the hope that those in Christ have, and it is the reason for our joy because we know God desires this, too.

What would it mean for you to have that sense of utter belonging to Christ? What would change? For some people, it changes everything.

On the church calendar today is the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi. Feast Days in the Christian tradition are special days to remember and celebrate the life and witness of someone who embodies the ideals of our faith in Christ. St. Francis is certainly one of those people, an inspiration to many even now 800 years after his death. It's serendipity to me that we're meeting out here under the trees with our toes in the dirt on Francis Feast Day. He was and is famous for his spiritual embrace of all creatures in praise of God. The hymn that we heard and hummed along to earlier is from his famous *Canticle of the Creatures*. From his conversion, or maybe we should say, from the first moments of his ongoing conversion, Francis' joyful devotion to God was simple, plain, and contagious.

There are so many stories. So many examples. One in particular, from very early in his life, was in the home of his friend Bernard, who had seen the change in Francis' life and wanted to talk with him about what was going on in him.

In the evening after talking all night, they retired to bed. Bernard pretended to sleep, even feigning a snore. He wanted to see what Francis would do. Francis was pretending to sleep, too. Once he thought Bernard was asleep, he rose from his mat, knelt on the floor, and prayed all night long in silence. Bernard listened. From time to time, four whispered words would escape from his lips, "My God, my all." That was his simple prayer, not just that night, but for all of life. It was Francis' prayer. It was the meaning of his life. My God. My all.

How different is this life orientation from the "rubbish" as Paul would put it that we settle for:

Work Hard, Play Hard—that's a common bumper sticker version of life for some people.

One NBA player once said, "People complain we make a lot of money, but what they don't understand is that we need a lot of money because we spend a lot of money." For Paul in his former life, life was about law and zeal.

These twin expressions: work hard, play hard; make a lot, spend a lot; law and zeal.

And here is Francis: My God and my all. What if this were your prayer? How would it change things for you, if with your breath you prayed, my God, my all? Most of us could say the words, and they would mean a lot to us. It may be only the saints whose lives become the prayer.

Karl Barth felt the gap between his life and the lives of the saints like Francis who emulated Jesus. From feeling the weight of this gap, he "famously taught that just as our inability to speak of God gives glory to God, so our inability to imitate Christ can glorify God as well." He took hope in that. "...we edge forward, trusting in some holy transformation as we fumble along." (adapted from James Howell, *Christ was Like St. Francis*, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, 105)." That kind of hope helps me come to grips with the gap between my life and the life of Francis, or Paul, and certainly Jesus.

But the gap may be even wider than it seems at first. If the gap is wide because of the devotion to love God manifest by people like Paul and Francis, not to mention Mother Theresa, Millard Fuller, Doris Day, and so on, there is something even more that each of these people understood about the true path that is the way of Christ.

Again, hear Paul's full prayer, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." To make clear what we're hearing, the apostle whose hunger to know Christ exceeded the bounds of this life, prayed to share the sufferings of Christ. Paul understood the path to unity with God is through the cross.

Every holy person you'll meet knows this, too. The path to God isn't around the pain; it's right through it. Jesus understood this. "Take this cup from me," he prayed, "but not my will but yours be done."

As unlikely as it may sound, even Garth Brooks understood this, too. You know Garth Brooks, the mega-country music star. When he burst onto the stage in the late 80s, early 90s he did so with a hit about friends in low places, which could be a Philippians 2 theology, now that I think of it. But the songs I'm thinking of here are three that came out over a few years where Garth is reflecting on life and suffering.

*The Dance*, *The River*, *the Fire*. They have lines like these that speak of joy and pain.

In *The River*, each day's a constant battle just to stay between the shores, but we must set sail our vessels and choose to chance the rapids.

In *The Fire*, life is not tried it is merely survived when we stand outside the fire. The burns, the wounds are part of really living.

In *The Dance*, he reflects: I could have missed the pain, but I'd have had to miss the dance.

In each of these songs, an understanding of suffering emerges that he seemed to be grappling with in those early years. We're going to suffer. We're going to have pain in this life. The path of life isn't paved with smooth stones, but we keep going.

Now maybe we'd say that Garth's theology is several degrees short of what Apostle Paul had in mind with the sufferings of Christ, but he's at least us pointing in the same direction.

He didn't seem to have let this go. A few years ago, in a concert in Minneapolis, Garth was belting out *The Dance* for the encore. During that song, he walks to the edge of the stage and then sits down. Then he spots a sign being held up. While singing he gestures to the woman holding the sign to come forward to him. As she does, we see that she's an older woman, older than most in the crowd. Her eyes are big as saucers of course in this moment, but they also have something else in them too, some wisdom from having lived some life. Then we notice the top of her head is wrapped in a headpiece. Garth has stopped singing, but the band keeps playing; the crowd keeps singing along the lyrics they know by heart. Tens of thousands of people are having a concert while two people are having a heart to heart. She hands to Garth her sign. Clearly moved, he holds it up for everyone to read. "Chemo this morning. Garth tonight. Enjoying the dance." Garth takes the sign with him—he takes it home. It's her gift. In return, he hands her his guitar. It's hers to keep now. So are the cheers from thousands as the stadium is transformed from concert to prayer hall. He's pointing us somewhere in the same direction. Somewhere our sufferings teach us something deeply, and the sufferings of Jesus that he endured is a kind of prayer for us that we might know him. And that we might truly know him in our lives—through that path.

St. Francis understood this, in a way that few others have. Late in his life, St. Francis prayed:

My Lord Jesus Christ, two graces I ask of you before I die:  
 the first is that in my life I may feel in my soul and in my body, as far as possible  
 the sorrow which you, tender Jesus,  
 underwent in the hour of your most bitter passion;  
 the second is that I may feel in my heart, as far as possible,  
 the abundance of love which you, Son of God, were inflamed,  
 so as willingly to undergo such a great passion for us sinners (Little Flowers, 197)

How many of us will attain this kind of devotion to Christ, his suffering and his love? How many of us even want to have our lives shaken this deeply by Christ's grace? It's so much easier to "stand just outside the fire." To make Christ my own as he has made me his own:

it looks like a prayer to feel the sorrow and suffering of Jesus  
 a prayer to feel the abundance of the love of Jesus for all of us and all of those around us.  
 a prayer in the darkness of night and the dark days of life: *My God and my all*

We keep our eyes turned toward the hope of total joy of discovering that in the love of God, there is no horizon, at least one we will ever reach. There is no bottom to this well. There is no end to this song.

Not even death can win victory over this love.

It is by love that creation is brought into being, that life is enriched, that hope endures

It is by this love that we are being redeemed,

and it is by this love that our lives are given their ultimate meaning: to grow in the inexhaustible knowledge and unquenchable love of Jesus Christ, poured out for you and for me.

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