

“It’s all rubbish!”

Philippians 3:4b-14

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: O God, our Help in Ages Past, our Hope for years to come. Bring forth your goodness and may your love be a balm for our grief. Open these words by the power of your Holy Spirit that we may hear what you have for us this day. Amen.

In our text this morning from his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul is at a point in his life where he is throwing it all away. He tells us how he is going to clean house. He's thrown away his valuables.

In college, I threw away my keys and my student ID which sat on my cafeteria tray. A few years later, I was so glad that a grad school course was over that I threw away every piece of paper associated with the class. Actually, I threw it away in the fire pit—rubbish, I thought—for sure! Most recently, I threw away my USB thumb drive by mistake! I grieved for weeks. I wasn't sure how I was going to go on.

What valuables have you thrown away? What of yours has been thrown away by someone else?

Once, I heard of someone who had a hand carved wooden crèche set, who decided to enhance the drama of Advent by hiding the small wooden baby Jesus, in order to wait and put him in the manger the night before Christmas. She wrapped him in tissue paper and tucked him behind the crèche, on the fireplace mantle. Unfortunately, a family member knocked the

unassuming bundle of tissue into the fire and baby Jesus went up in flames.¹

Throwing valuables away, losing them, burning them, leaves us with pangs of regret, a surge of nostalgia. That's why the act of downsizing is so very, very hard.

And then there are times when our valuables go up in flames from no fault of our own. Times when our valuables are wrenched away. Stolen. This past Sunday night and the wee hours of Monday the concert venue along the strip in Las Vegas became a place where valuables littered the scene. Water bottles, lawn chairs, sunglasses, purses, car keys, cell phones. That horror of yet another act of gun violence in this country wrenched valuables from owners and killed 59 people. Over 500 hundred more were sent to nearby hospitals; leaving tens of thousands reeling from the traumatic event, shaking their confidence and sense of security. The greatest thing lost that day---life, and perhaps, an ability, our collective ability, to hope and dream. All of that----up in flames.

I awoke rather early on Monday morning---to hear of this horrendous act of violence, and I was immediately glued to the news cycles as the day and details unfolded. This week I've

¹ Story from a colleague also preaching on this text this morning, Rev. Ann R. Palmerton.

alternated between feeling angry and feeling numb. Will this be what it takes to finally motivate change? At the same time a cynical part of me doubts anything will change. Because if we didn't do anything after Sandy Hook, what will we do now?

I move from feeling angry and numb to feeling afraid. Afraid this isn't the last time for such news. Afraid this is only the latest in a continuing string of bloody encounters. People will keep acquiring assault weapons and will keep turning them on innocents. Because they can and will.

But I'm inspired by the heroes---the helpers---first responders, nurses and doctors who worked and are still working to keep so many people alive. I've caught myself more than once catching a tear when I read about them.

I read about the victims. You have too; these articles shred our hearts. A mother, a new husband, a dog-owner, a hair-dresser, a county clerk, a salmon-fisherman, a soldier. I need tissues to read these bios. Tributes offered by family members leave us weeping.²

This week something so terrible happened at the Route 91 Harvest Festival in Las Vegas. Something so violent and devastating that we can't get our heads and hearts around it.

² Scott Black Johnston, Senior Pastor, weekly email, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY.

Stephen Paddock started firing. When concert goers celebrating friendships and family and the love of music finally realized what was happening, that those next to them were injured or dying, that they were being shot at, they let go of everything....and they ran. They dropped it all and ran.

In his own time and context, Paul also drops it all. He drops his social and religious privileges, his bloodline and education, his family background; everything he inherits and earns, his 401ks and his diplomas. He throws them all away and runs in a different direction. It was life and death for him.

“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Philippians 3: 8)

Paul used to be somebody. He used to have wealth and community respect. I imagine there's still a part of him that misses his lovely home, that remembers receiving esteem and admiration from others. Paul used to be somebody, somebody with a secretary, a vacation home and memberships to the right clubs. He used to be somebody.

But when faced with the reality of his life----he makes a turn. A turn that I think is important to pay attention to. He says:

“I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.” (Philippians 3: 8-9)

He used to be somebody. Now he belongs to God. Paul writes from prison, where loss is real. He is no longer free in the world he once knew. But now he is at liberty. And so, he counts all his achievements as loss. All that he used to hold so tightly---has no value-it’s rubbish—it’s all waste. He brings nothing to the table, except for the conviction that he’s been claimed by God. It’s as if he says: “All I’ve got, *all I’ve got*, is whose I am.”

In times of deep grief and the enormous anxiety of a nation and world, even in our outrage, we are left to figure out if any sense can be found in the senseless; if any words can be conjured from the unspeakable. We return to the rich stories of our faith tradition to remind us of God’s never-ending love for each of us. We return to hear the words that in sure and certain hope of the resurrection, we belong to God, now, always and forever.

The tragedies throughout 2017 will test the bonds that connect us, now and for years to come.

In her Time magazine essay, Susanna Schrobsdorff, says

“if you could see grief on a map, there would be rings of anguish radiating from whole regions of the U.S. right now. From Texas to Florida to Puerto Rico and Las Vegas, the hurt would expand with each person affected to the people they’re connected with in all parts of the country. No state would remain untouched...”³

She goes on,

“We have run out of adjectives for these kinds of events. Last year’s deadliest mass shooting in American history has been overtaken by this year’s deadliest mass shooting in American history. The last set of catastrophic hurricanes has been eclipsed by this year’s set. These tragedies are accumulating so fast, we forget that many of the ramifications are just starting to unfurl. One wonders if it’s possible for us to expand our hearts and minds to embrace this level of hurt and destruction---a trail of stricken families and communities that stretches from the Gulf to the Atlantic and parts in between.”

It must be said that the trail of kindness and courage reaches just as far.

That means our compassion must never grow weak and we must never grow weary. Among many things we may resist

³ Susanna Schrobsdorff, *The Pursuit of Happy-ish*, *Time Magazine*, October 16, 2017, 59.

these day, we must now resist our urge to let the next outrage or tragedy erase the images of those who are still suffering.⁴

Paul wants Christians to press on, like Jesus pressed on. Paul wants us to press on, here and now: especially now, to love, care, give, serve and sacrifice like Jesus did. Paul sits in a prison cell, staring death in the face. But internally, spiritually, he's running—running toward Jesus with temples pounding, heart pumping, muscles aching, face sweating, he is running.⁵

“but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3: 13-14).

I'll close with the words of a friend, who shared them with me this week as we saw the images, felt the grief and worked through sorrow and disbelief of all the events we can't un-see.

She writes,

Sometimes helplessness provokes us to despair; other times apathy hardens our hearts. But with a little attention, we can allow our grief and compassion to re-humanize us, our relationships, and our society.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p98.

Grief reminds us that in the face of inhumane destruction and disregard for human life, we really do still care about human life and the suffering of others. Grief reminds us that we believe that life is still good, worthy of protection, nurture, compassion and cultivation.

I want my grief, [our collective gasp], of the events this week to re-humanize me. I want that collective grief to reignite my basic human desire to live without fear, care for those in pain, and work for a world in which there are fewer reasons to grieve.

Maybe in moments like this---as people of faith we remember that we can see that light shines in our darkest days. Maybe we'll remember that the world is full of people actively working for good. In that may we find the strength in ourselves to do things that inject our common life with dignity, compassion, and hope.⁶

May the healing love of God in Jesus Christ be with us all.

Amen.

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⁶ Rev. Jessica Patchett, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC on her new blog.