

October 8, 2023 – Philippians 3:4b-14 & Isaiah 5:1-7

Three weeks before my wife and I got married, we did one of the most foolish things we have ever done: we went on a mission trip. OK, so going on a mission trip is not foolish. It's never foolish. And, in fact, this particular trip turned out just fine. But the idea of going... to do manual labor... halfway across the country... with a bunch of teenagers... three weeks before we were supposed to get married? Yeah, that was kinda dumb.

The trip was to a little town called Caldwell deep in southeastern Ohio Appalachia. And on the last day, we went out to a new site. A pair of houses in the country. One just needed a new coat of paint. The other needed... far more.

You see, the family that lived in this house had a number of debilitating health conditions. Which meant that simple things like cleaning were impossible for them. On top of that, they were kinda hoarders too, and had difficulty getting rid of things, even if they weren't being used. Our mission that day was to clean out the garage of their split level house. Which sounded like a simple enough task, until we saw this garage.

For one thing, they kept their dogs in there and the cement floor was covered in animal excrement and urine. The floor had settled as well, causing rainwater to flood back into it. But leaves had blocked the only drain and the water was left stagnant, covering everything in a thick layer of mold and mildew and decaying plant matter. Insects were living in every nook and cranny. And it reeked worse than anything I have ever smelled before or since.

We were not prepared for this level of clean-up. We didn't have the safety equipment. We didn't have the tools. But we did our best. Despite the fact that I'm allergic to dogs and mold and dust, and by the end of the day had the worst allergic meltdown of my entire life. Despite all the challenges, we cleaned that garage.

And we did so by emptying it of every item. Packed though it was with stuff that they had hoarded. Stuff that really might have been valuable if it weren't now covered in mold and rust and stench. The garage was a garbage pit. Full of trash. And we emptied it and hosed it out until it was actually reasonably clean.

Sometimes, that's the way you have to clean. When it's so filthy that you can't even recognize the items you are cleaning, you just empty it. Haul it out and hose it down until there's nothing left inside. Because at that point, keeping the stuff is actually a loss. And losing the stuff is actually a gain.

That's the paradigm that St Paul sets up for us in our Epistle lesson. *"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."*

Now, keep in mind, this is a man who has a lot to lose. In the paragraph just before this, he goes on at great length to talk about his status in the Jewish community. He was circumcised on the eighth day, just as the Law required. Many Jews of that era had lost track of their tribal lineage, but Paul's family had not. They knew they were of the tribe of Benjamin. One of only two tribes that did not rebel against the throne during the Israelite civil war.

He was considered a Hebrew of Hebrews. Trained in the strict, rigorous education of a Pharisee. So zealous for God that he actively persecuted Christians until his conversion. By every standard of self-righteous legalism, he was blameless. As a Jew, he was convinced that he had earned God's favor in every possible way. Paul had a lot in his life to consider as profit. But now, he looks at it all and considers it loss.

No, actually, he goes beyond that even. In the next verse, he says, *"I count them as skubala."* Skubala is a Greek word. In your ESV, it's translated as "rubbish." But "rubbish" doesn't really convey the intensity of skubala. You see, skubala is a rather crude word in Greek. A bit of an expletive even. And it means "human waste," if you get my drift. Paul considers everything "skubala," that he may gain Christ.

You would not believe how first-year seminarians can giggle when they find out St Paul cussed in the Bible. But that's just how revolted Paul is with his former life. That a man of such high, upstanding language and conduct would resort to this kind of profanity, because it's the only word that truly expresses how disgusting his good works were in God's eyes. It's the only word that truly expresses how disgusting our good works are in God's eyes.

Remember that garage I cleaned out? We are that garage. Each of us are filled with good things that God has given us. A mind and a heart and a soul. A body to do God's will and an intellect to know his Word.

And yet, it's covered in mold and excrement and death. It's covered in sin. And now it's worthless. No, it's less than worthless. It's actually more profitable to get rid of it, than keep it inside us.

As Isaiah says in our Old Testament lesson, we are the Lord's beloved vineyard. But, because of sin, we produce nothing but wild grapes. Have you ever tasted a wild grape? Don't. It's not pleasant. They are tiny and sour and mostly seeds and all around pretty disgusting. But they grow insanely fast and they're nearly impossible to kill.

A field taken over by wild grapes is worth nothing. It cannot be harvested. And attempting to do so is a waste of time and money. And, according to Isaiah, our good works are worth so little to God that it would be more profitable to abandon us as a wasteland to be trampled and ignored.

The contents of that garage were less than worthless. The vines of that vineyard were less than worthless. The contents of Paul's heart – and our hearts – are less than worthless. And so, they are emptied.

Emptied of everything filthy and disgusting. Emptied of wild grapes and skubala. Emptied of pride and arrogance and self-righteousness. We are emptied of our sin. And washed clean with the blood of Christ. Washed clean with His righteousness. Washed clean in the waters of Holy Baptism that purify us of all sin.

And make no mistake about it, it is not a righteousness that is our own. It is not a righteousness that comes from what we've said or what we've done or who we are or how much we think we're worth. It is a righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

A righteousness that comes from when Jesus Christ entered into the filth of our garage, of our hearts. And suffered far more than just some dirty hands and an allergic meltdown. He suffered and died on a cross to empty us of our sin and wash us clean.

It's no wonder that Paul wants to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. When you understand what it was that we presented to Christ. When you understand the skubala He saw when He looked at us and the incredible cleansing that comes from His death on the cross. How can you not want to know Him? How can you not want to share whatever suffering you have to endure to follow in His footsteps.

On our own, we can't fill our lives with anything good, because there is nothing good within us. But by the faith the Holy Spirit gives us, we can cling to Christ. We can know him and the power of his resurrection. We can face death with confidence that because he lives, we also shall live. And when we do that, we become like Christ.

And that's a pretty amazing thing to hear. That Christ Jesus has made me his own and now I press on to become more like him. A vineyard with good grapes. A life with good works. Paul assures us that we won't see perfection this side of heaven. But we still press on.

We forget the sin that lies behind us. That's been cleaned out. It's been hauled away in trash bags. It's been hosed out by baptismal waters. And it will continue to be hauled away and hosed out, time and time again. It's gone.

Our job now is to strain forward for what lies ahead. To press on toward the goal, to press on toward good works for our neighbor and faith in Christ and hope in the resurrection of the dead. Until we finally receive that upward call of God in Christ Jesus that brings us into his presence. And then, perfection really will be ours.

I still marvel at that mission trip. About what we did for that family. But I would do it all again. Not because I'm so proud of myself for what I endured and consider it so valuable in God's eyes. It's not. What we did was, in and of itself, no more valuable to my salvation than the trash we hauled out. No, I would do it again because I want to know Christ. I want to know the power of His resurrection. I want to share in His sufferings. I want to be more like him. Amen.