

LENT 5

March 13, 2016

Philippians 3:4b-14

"Jesus Priceless Treasure"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

I still **remember it so clearly, even though it was eleven years ago!** Maybe because the Tanzania Mission Trip in 2005 was **my first time to visit that beautiful country and meet the amazing African Lutheran brothers and sisters there.**

We were staying at a Christian Guest House in Arusha, the big city where the Simonson's lived, and where Dr. Mark Jacobson has headed up Selian Hospital (and, later, the Arusha Lutheran Medical Center.)

It was my second time that night to make the 50 yard walk up the dirt road to the other building of our hostel in Arusha. I wanted to **get a thermos of hot water so I could make some instant coffee** when I woke up the next morning.

The night was very dark, there were no streetlights and **I had tripped coming back a few minutes earlier and broken the lining of a thermos jug.** So now I was going to make a second attempt.

For some reason, the guard **went with me** this time with a flashlight to show the path, and he even **insisted on carrying the thermos!**

But that was okay because **it gave us some time to visit.** As I have found on subsequent trips to Tanzania, **Christians there seem very comfortable talking with strangers about their faith, especially if those strangers are Americans.**

He asked if I was a pastor and I answered in the affirmative. He seemed pleased.

Then he wondered how many members were in my church.

I replied that there are something like 1300 members, but that only a fraction of them are in worship on Sunday morning.

I'll never forget, **shocked incredulous look on his face.** He asked, *"Why?"* I answered, *"I wish I knew."*

He thought for a moment and then said eagerly, as if this would solve all my problems, *"Well then, pastor, you need to teach the people that they should be in worship every Sunday. You have to preach about it."*

So here I am, taking his advice. .

You and I were created to worship God. That's the plain and simple fact. And **there should be absolutely nothing more important for us than coming to weekly worship.**

It is here in worship that we can encounter the **living Christ – our greatest treasure from God.**

And it is in worship that we find all the treasures of the Christian church: the **Word of God**, the sacraments of **baptism** and **Holy Communion**, and our **brothers and sisters in Christ**. We should want to be here every week!

But, of course, **you're all here today, so I'm just preaching to the choir**. And so, **instead of scolding people who are in church for not coming to church**, I'd like to **ponder a question this morning**.

After our experiences with African Christians, in 2005 and on every trip since then, the adults and youth on our Tanzania Mission Teams always wonder: *"Why do the Lutherans in Tanzania seem to love worshipping God? Why are the Tanzanians so committed to weekly worship? ... And why aren't we?"*

Before we actually attended worship at Monduli Lutheran Church on that Sunday in 2005, I think most of us would have assumed that the reason would be **dynamic worship, preaching and music**. Maybe something more exciting and lively than we're used to here, at plain, old First Lutheran Church.

After all, so many churches in our country, trying desperately to somehow lure people back to worship, have tried all sorts of ways to make church fun, uplifting, or entertaining. **Some of you may even have heard from your children that "church is boring."**

So I half expected that during worship in Monduli we'd be **dancing and hollering and clapping and waving our arms** in the air.

But **the truth was quite different**. Yes, we did some of that in the Girl's School daily chapel, but not in Sunday worship. The **music was good, but not particularly uplifting or emotional**.

The liturgy – well, believe it or not, **they seemed to like liturgical chanting even more than I do, and you know that's saying a lot!**

They **used liturgical parts of the communion service I didn't even know existed!**

As for the preaching, I was the guest preacher that year, so I don't know about their pastors, but **one of the Maasai girls told a team member, "Your pastor's a good preacher. Why don't people come every Sunday?"** (And, incidentally, in subsequent years, when I listened to the Tanzanian pastors in translation, **their sermons honestly didn't sound much different from mine.**)

The worship service was not particularly dynamic, and yet, **as 600 people of all ages streamed forward for communion**, I saw both a **great joy and a deep hunger on their faces**.

I'll never forget the scene of them crowded at the communion railing **holding out their hands in eager anticipation** of a foretaste of the heavenly feast which we receive at the Lord's table.

Friends, **they knew that they were receiving a priceless treasure at that communion railing.**
They were **receiving Jesus Christ himself.**

And **even after the 2½ hour service, they didn't seem in a hurry to go home.**

Why is worship – gathering together as the people of God – so important to these people?

I think Paul's words in Philippians can shed some light on the subject.

Paul has come to count everything else in his life – all of his accomplishments, his fame, the good times, and the bad – as nothing, as unimportant, compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord.

Paul *“knows Christ and the power of his resurrection”* and **nothing else is really important for him.**

The Christians we met in Tanzania were the same. They have somehow managed to retain the **excitement, the joy, and the lively faith** that comes from knowing what an awesome gift – what a priceless treasure – we've received in God's son.

You and I should know that, too. You and I have been told again and again that Jesus was given to die so that we might have eternal life.

You and I know that **although we don't deserve it, we've been redeemed as a totally free gift** from God.

So one would expect that we, too, would eagerly **look forward to worshipping our savior each week.**

We often hear how, as Americans, we've come to take for granted the wonderful freedoms we enjoy in this land. Can it also be true that **living in this rich nation has caused us Christians to take for granted the gift of Jesus Christ?**

OUR LIVES ARE OVERFLOWING WITH MATERIAL TREASURES. Have those treasures **blinded us to the one, priceless treasure** that is Jesus Christ our savior?

Have we become so complacent that our Church membership is just one allegiance among many?

Look at the language Paul uses at the end of today's passage. Being a Christian, **living out our faith,** is not like passively floating along on a cloud. Paul compares it to **running a race, striving towards a goal.**

And although he always insists that we don't earn our salvation, Paul does know that **following Jesus requires sacrifice, perseverance, and courage.**

But he's **absolutely certain** that **the joy of knowing Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection** make it **worth the struggle.**

Nothing else matters for Paul.

And unless we've forgotten how much Christ has done, **nothing else should matter for us, either.**
Amen.

[My prayer is that **a renewal of our faith will bring with it a renewed desire to be in worship** every week, so that we can ENCOUNTER, AGAIN AND AGAIN, THE PRICELESS TREASURE OF JESUS AND HIS LOVE.]