

“It’s All Garbage!”

Introduction: A couple of weeks ago I had occasion to do what I know a number of you have had to do in recent years, and that is to move an aging parent into a greater level of care. In my case, it was moving my 90-year-old father, who is experiencing an increasing level of dementia, from an independent living situation into one called assisted living. On the flight down to NC, I was thinking that it would be pretty straight forward. His new quarters could only hold so much, so we’d selected a few pieces of furniture, and the clothing and personal items that he would need, and planned to shuffle them across the street and that would be it. We had even hired “Two Men and a Truck” to do the heavy lifting.

What I failed to anticipate was what would need to happen with the rest of dad’s stuff, as well as how much of that stuff there actually was! Not the leftover furniture; that would be taken care of in a second-hand sale. The real question was what we would do with what seemed like an endless supply of personal knick-knacks, along with a couple dozen file drawers and boxes of financial and personal history. We all knew that my mother was a pack-rat. And when she died three years ago we threw out a lot of her stuff. But what I didn’t know was that my father is equally as much of a saver, just a more organized and hidden one! It soon became clear that he hasn’t really thrown out a piece of paper since graduating from college in 1951.

So, my sister and I were forced to go through boxes and files of personal journals, past sermons, Bible studies, and articles that he had either written or saved. We had to go through photo albums chocked full of family history, pictures of his second-grade class, college and Navy year books, retirement good wishes, and aerograms (remember those?!) of mine from Egypt. We had to cull through documents like my mother’s birth-certificate, his parent’s divorce papers, and statements of various bank and investment accounts that we weren’t sure even existed anymore. And we had to work through files he kept and accumulated on topics ranging from the conflict in the Middle East to the Supreme Court, to the religious right (one of his favorite subjects). He actually started to go through those but had to stop because, as he put it, “I feel like I’m throwing my life away!” My sister and I went through a range of emotions, from anger at all the stuff our parents were forcing us to deal with, to guilt as we hurled file after file and notebook after notebook into a dumpster, or into the box for shredding.

What helped bring needed perspective on the whole episode was the reading we just heard from the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, an ancient but timely letter I’m glad did not get thrown away! In particular, I was struck by his phrase, as the NLT puts it: “I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. . . For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage . . .” (v. 7).

Whatever is he talking about? Well, the event we celebrate today, the resurrection of Jesus, turned Paul’s life upside down. It changed how he thought about all that he had, and how he thought about all that he had done. It enabled him to stop grabbing onto what he thought had brought him life, to receive and live in the new life which Jesus has brought. It’s what enables any of us to release our grip on the past and to look forward to what lies ahead, living fruitfully in the present as we do (v. 13). Let’s unpack this a bit.

## I. The Grip of Ancestry and Achievements

A. In this section of his letter, Paul is taking to task those who had come to believe that a relationship with the living God was based upon one's ancestry and achievements, by who you were and what you had done. The sign of such ancestry, the mark of being one of the chosen people known as Israel, was not a birth certificate or marriage license, it was circumcision. And so it seems that this group was declaring that if you were a Gentile Christian, in order to become truly included in the people of God, you first need to get circumcised, as well as adopt other Jewish ceremonial and cultural customs, like dietary laws and the observance of special days and feasts. Such a view also led its adherents into the quagmire of human achievement and self-salvation, as many had come to believe that it was by these practices, by what one did, that one's standing with God was gained and strengthened.

B. Paul was so troubled and concerned by this way of thinking that he called those who were pushing this kind of self-help spirituality "dogs," "people who do evil," and "mutilators." He held nothing back because he knew that if his readers followed this way of thinking, their relationship with the living God was in danger. It's important to note here that Paul is not being anti-Jewish. Paul, actually, was as Jewish as they come, both in terms of his ancestry and his achievements. In vv. 5-6 we see him open up the "boxes" filled with his ethnic purity and past achievements. As for his purity, he was a Jew by birth and had been circumcised as an infant at just the right time. He could trace his Jewish heritage back 2,000 years to the original twelve tribes. Not only that but his family was from the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe out of which the first king of Israel had been selected—Saul—after whom Paul had most likely originally been named. As for his accomplishments, he had become a part of the extreme law-abiding group called the Pharisees, he had actively persecuted the upstart Christian church, and was as obedient to the law given through Moses as humanly possible.

## II. The Freedom of Death and Resurrection

A. As far as ancestry and achievements, there was none better than Paul. Yet, all that stuff, says Paul, all of that ancestry and all of those achievements that I used to think were highly valuable I now consider to all be garbage. I have tossed them all in the dumpster and am free from them. True circumcision, Paul had come to learn, is circumcision of the heart. Human effort is not what gets us to God; what Jesus has done through his death and resurrection is what God has done to get him to us. Our righteousness—our right standing with God, God's way of making us right with himself—comes as we embrace through faith what Jesus has done for us, and respond to his invitation to join his family, not as we do any number of things for him or point to our own ancestry.

B. It's not that Paul holds his past to be unimportant. It shaped who he had become and was the foundation for all he had come to believe. And what he had come to believe is that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had acted, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to fulfill his promise to bless the peoples of the earth, a promise begun with Abraham, in a radically unexpected way. And so now the past was not worth clinging to. His many accomplishments were not worth saving. Instead, freed from the guilty grip of possible failure, the burden of self-effort, and the ugly nationalism of ancestry, Paul wanted to forget the past and live in the present fueled by the self-giving new life and power that come out of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Illustration: On my drive back from NC, somewhere in West Virginia, I think, I saw a huge billboard with two pictures on it: one was a beautiful sunlight sky, the other was a huge fire. And the question written

over both was this: “Are you going to heaven or hell when you die?” Now, that’s not a bad question, but I’m not sure how helpful it is. Not only does it attempt to scare people into faith, but it can lead us to believe that our faith is only about our future. In point of fact, our faith, when rightly understood, is our present. As Eugene Peterson puts it, reflecting on a line from the poet T. S. Eliot: “The end is where we start from.” So, the better question might be: “How does your vision of eternity affect the way you live today?”

C. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul puts it like this: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Or, as he put it to the Philippians: “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (3:12). There is no more need to prove ancestry. There is no more need to pile up achievements, hoping to qualify in some way for acceptance. There is simply living by grace, by the God who has taken hold of us, living from his love and not for it. And so, fueled by the love of God as Paul has experienced it in the death and resurrection of Jesus, Paul is able to forget what is past and press on toward what is ahead.

On the Sunday that I was with my dad, we were listening to a worship service on the radio while eating our frozen waffles. Most of the cleaning out and throwing away was behind us. The only thing that awaited was the move. The scripture text read during that radio service was this one from Philippians, as it was the Epistle Lesson for the fifth Sunday in Lent. After it had been read, I said to my dad: “This is where you are: Forgetting what is past and looking forward to what lies ahead. And we can both look forward to what lies ahead, to assisted living and beyond, because of the resurrection of Jesus and the incredible new and lasting life that he has given us as a gift.”

I’m not sure how much of that he took in. But it is the crux of the matter for each of us. If we’re not living from and out of the life-giving love of Jesus, and toward the new life that he offers, we’ll end up clinging to the past and all its trinkets because it will be all that we really have. Gratefully, the resurrection reveals that we have much more that awaits us than we could ever ask or imagine, which really frees us to live and love fruitfully in the present, just as Jesus lived and loved.