

“DEATH IS LIKE CROSSING THE FINISH LINE”

Sermon Text – Philippians 3:4-14, Series A

Sat. & Sun., October 7 & 8, 2017

18th Sun. a. Pentecost, Proper 22, A

OT Lesson – Isaiah 5:1-7

Epistle – Philippians 3:4b-14

Gospel – Matthew 21:33-46

Zion Lutheran Church, Beecher, IL

PLEASE NOTE: As usual, the preached version of this week’s sermon is different from the sermon notes shown below which were taken into the pulpit. Here’s the link: <https://youtu.be/FU5mJrxI9fg> to the sermon being preached at our Sunday service. But, whether you view the sermon being preached or read these notes, may God feed and foster faith in Christ Jesus, His Son, our Savior!

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. [Amen.]

Story. Man died and approached the gates of heaven.

Jesus met him at the locked gate.

Man: [*with much confidence in his voice*] **Hey Jesus! It’s me! It’s great to see You! My life’s over on earth. I’m here now ready to live with You in heaven! Would You please open the gate & let me in?”**

Jesus: **“Why should I let you into My heaven? Are you ‘good enough’ for Me to let you in?”**

Man: **“Well... I’ve tried really hard all my life to be good. In fact... when I was a young boy, I always took out the garbage when I was asked.”**

Jesus: **“That’s nice... but that’s not enough. How can doing just *that* make up for all that you’ve done?”**

Man: **“Well... after I married... I loved & respected my wife... and I took good care of my kids!”**

Jesus: **“Uhhhh... that’s fine. But, that’s also what I *expect* you to do. If you *hadn’t* done those things... you’d be in even MORE trouble! Tell Me... how does doing what I call you to do... *even begin* to make up for the times that you went against Me?”**

Man: **“Well... I went to church just about every week... and... at two different times during my life... I even served in leadership positions at church! How about *that*?”**

Jesus: **“Mister... are you kidding Me? Do you actually... I mean... do you actually *think*... that what you’ve said so far... can *make up* for all the times that you sinned against Me in your thinking... in what you said... and in what you did during your entire lifetime?”**

Man: [*Now losing confidence in the outcome of this discussion with Jesus*] **“Well... maybe what I’ve told you doesn’t quite make up for *everything* wrong that I’ve done.”**

Jesus: **“No, it certainly doesn’t! In fact, all that you’ve said so far... doesn’t even begin to give Me cause to open this gate for you to enter heaven!”**

Man: [*Looked down... shook his head in dejection... and said in a quiet voice*] **“Ohhhhhh! It looks like *anything*... or even *everything* that I did... can’t make me ‘good enough’ to enter heaven!**

Jesus: “Nope!”

Man: [*now realizing that all that he'd done... had no effect on opening the gate of heaven*] **“It looks as if the only way that I'll get into heaven... is by the grace of God!”**

Jesus: **“Ok! Now you're talking! Finally, we're getting somewhere!”**

Dear friends... that little story... could very well have been St. Paul... for in a way... it runs through the course of his life!

Early in his life... Paul had confidence in what he'd done that would open the gates of heaven for him. In fact... he says that if “anyone” ought to have confidence in his works to enter heaven... that he has **“more.”**

You heard him list off his early accomplishments... He'd followed the Law of God to the letter. He even had a great pedigree... in that he was born from the “right family.”

- Circumcised on the eighth day...
- He worked harder at being a true Hebrew than anyone else
- He followed all the nuances of the Law...
- He even zealously persecuted those who he considered to be the enemies of God.

But... here he is... languishing in jail in Rome... fully expecting that the trial that is before him... very well will result in his death.

In a very real sense... Paul thinks that this may be one of his last opportunities to write to those in Philippi.

And... face to face with that reality of his own death, Paul preaches utter confidence that he'll be OK when he draws his last breath! And that confidence... isn't in what he's done; rather... its fully vested in what God has done for him in Christ Jesus!

Paul boldly jettisons his work... his efforts... to be “good enough” in God's eyes. Instead he says that he *doesn't* have **“a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law... but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”** (Phil. 3:9, ESV)

And then... with that in place... with God's righteousness given to him as a gift of God... he boldly goes forward in his life! **“...one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”** (Phil. 3:13b-14, ESV)

Yeah... Paul's ready for whatever comes in his life... even death! And as he looks at it... he sees death as sorta like “Crossing the Finish Line...” and heaven is like receiving the prize.

But... it isn't a prize that he... or you, by the way... have earned in any way. Rather... it's the prize that Jesus has earned for you.

Yeah... Jesus Christ earned the prize of heaven for you... by living on earth a perfect, holy life... and by taking your sins upon himself and suffering their punishment in your place.

That... right there... is God's great exchange. Jesus' righteousness... His perfection... exchanged for your sin... and your imperfection!

So the prize of heaven that Paul mentions... isn't a reward you've earned... but a reward Christ has earned for you – by his life, death & resurrection.

That... is your only source of confidence and comfort in the face of death. For if you were to rely on yourself... on your own good works... on your own good deeds to earn your own way into heaven... who can you ever know... that you'd done *enough*? There would always be nagging doubt that would keep you up at night. You'd ever be asking yourself: **“Have I done enough? And if I haven't done enough... then what will come of me when I meet Jesus at the gate of heaven?”**

Those who trust in Christ still experience physical death... but death is simply a conduit or gateway... into eternal life!

Most likely every parent has had this happen to them. You're driving home and it's late at night. The children are all fast asleep in their car seats.

You pull into your driveway... shut off the car's engine... and the children don't move a muscle. They're in a deep sleep.

The parents gently carry them into the house... tuck them into their own beds... and when they wake up in the morning... they're astounded to find themselves home and in the comfort and safety of their own room.

For the children of God... death is like falling asleep on the journey home. The angels of God will gently carry your soul into your heavenly home... and when you awaken from the sleep of death... you'll find yourself in the eternal dwelling where Christ has prepared a place for you.

Here's how Jesus describes it in John, ch. 14: **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”** (John 14:1-6, ESV)

That's how the Gospel is. It's God's free gift to us. We look at Jesus' work done for us on the cross and through His open tomb... and confidently see that there... He has “done enough...” He'd done all that's needed... to open the gates of heaven for you, me, and all people. Repent and thankfully receive that which God in Christ eagerly wants to give to you! In Jesus' name, and for His sake. [Amen.]

The peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts & minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. [Amen.]