

Betting on the wrong horse

9th Sunday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity

Philippians 3:4b – 14



If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9and be found in him,

not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Straining Toward the Goal

12Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

A young woman from a non-Christian family enrolled in theology studies during the GDR era. This decision led to arguments within the family, and she had to endure the ridicule and contempt of her fellow students. What no one knew was that this young woman hadn't chosen to study theology voluntarily, but had been recruited by the Stasi to do just that. The young woman became a pastor, held services, led pastoral counseling sessions, prayed for people, and, along the way, wrote a file of thousands of pages in which the activities and attitudes of Christians were meticulously documented. She even became a popular pastor... and then the Berlin Wall fell! From one day to the next, she found herself with nothing, because her ministry was under false pretenses and no longer had any meaning. She had backed the wrong horse. The Apostle Paul had a similar experience. He had worked diligently, became famous and recognized. But from one day to the next, he realized he had backed the wrong horse. He summed up his entire life up to that point with the words: "I now consider it all a loss..." Paul actually used a much more drastic word here, making it very clear that his life up to that point had been completely meaningless and harmful. What was so bad about his life? Had he falsely claimed to be a rabbi? Was he caught in a moral lapse? No, nothing of the sort. We should also note that Paul recognized his life up to that point had not been worthless by human standards. An Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew among Hebrews, and a Pharisee among Pharisees. A very pious man, too. These things are not bad in themselves. It is also not bad for someone to live a pious and decent life. The problem with the apostle Paul was not the pious life itself. He lived blamelessly by human standards and had nothing to reproach himself for. The problem was that he had accomplished all of this on his own, and God played no role in it. Thus, he even turned against God. With his proud self-righteousness, he not only didn't need God, but even waged war against him. Paul, as well as the pastor hired by the Stasi, and anyone who acts like they don't need God can appear very pious! Paul obviously experienced a profound change in his life, which is how comes up with such clear words about his life thus far. But these words are not just about Paul's biography, but about the Christian life in general. For, in subtle and sometimes less subtle ways, this thinking of Saul before his conversion exists in all of us. We proudly stand before God and say things like: "Look, God! I don't need your mercy at all, and I can get along perfectly well without forgiveness!" This pious way is the most sophisticated way of facing God and proving that we don't need him. This way of thinking is common among us modern Christians. We view the Christian life and morality as our own accomplishments, which differentiate us from others and

set us apart. And then we say something like the Pharisee: "Thank God, I'm not like these sinners!" We only need grace as a crutch when it sometimes and under certain circumstances concerns the minor flaws that we all admittedly have. And the question we should all ask ourselves is this: "Did Christ walk the long road to the cross just to slightly improve Christian morality and the Christian life?"

When Paul speaks in such stark terms about his earlier life and the turning point he experienced at his conversion on the road to Damascus, he is not just speaking about his own experience, which concerns him and his biography. No, he is speaking of two fundamental paths that contradict each other and that occur as a struggle within every Christian: "On the one hand, trust in one's own works... On the other, trust in Christ!" Paul came to know Christ on the road to Damascus. This coming to know Jesus Christ was not just about knowing who Jesus is and what he does. From this point on, the apostle's life had a different basis, which he repeatedly defined as "being in Christ." From then on, his life was intertwined with Jesus. It is the risen Jesus who calls us as individual Christians, empowers us, and repeatedly sets us on a completely new path, so that we must recognize that we do not issue our own ticket to heaven, but that it was issued by Him. This "being in Christ" This turning point in the life of a Christian is something we see not only in Paul, but in all Christians after the resurrection of Jesus. And it still happens today. The disciples of Emmaus, who get to know the living Jesus, suddenly take a completely different path. They leave everything that has gone before and proclaim that the Lord has risen. The Apostle Paul did the same. His friends and relatives at the time certainly said he had gone mad. There is some truth in the word "mad." Those who are seized by Jesus become mad. From focusing on themselves, on their own life and their own achievements, the focus shifts to Christ, who from then on is the center and center of life. A shift in power has taken place in life. The signs have changed. Death and sin no longer have power over me. All these things remained with me on the cross of Jesus, and I now live in the resurrection. For the Apostle Paul, even his external circumstances, such as imprisonment and impending execution, no longer had any meaning, because now his life is in Christ.

The impending glory in Christ now determines his life. One could now say that Paul is no longer of this world or in touch with reality when it comes to his present life. His words certainly sound as if he had burned bridges behind him and his present life no longer had any meaning. But that's not true. Paul is gripped by Christ and from then on is moving toward his goal. The future goal that the apostle has before him determines and gives meaning and value to his current life. His current life only gains value on this path to the future. Thus, Christians are always in motion and never static. We can never sell our present life and our morals, as they are now, as the ultimate goal toward which Christians should strive; rather, we are those who pursue that goal. Therefore, we don't want to bear witness to our wonderful conversion so that others might imitate it. We don't want to impart the experience of faith, but rather faith itself. Which is different in every Christian. We do all this not as driven, but as called. Not as those who are constantly testing themselves and competing to see who is the best among us, but as those who have long since held the lottery ticket in Christ. The good works we do as Christians here on earth are present. But they are there, so to speak, by chance or incidentally. One of the orthodox Lutherans, Nicholas of Amsdorf, certainly overstepped the mark when he said that these good works are harmful. This is true, however, in the sense that good works can be harmful if they distract us from the goal in Christ, or if we actually want to rest on them. And in doing so, we forget that what Christ does in me is important, not what I do myself. The Christian will rely on nothing and no one except Christ.

When the Apostle Paul paints a picture of the turning point in his life, he doesn't want us to imitate him. Every person has received their own life story from God. And yet the apostle is a symbol of us as the entire Church. He is a symbol of the Church precisely in that he stands empty-handed, stretching out his hands and his heart to Christ. The image of the apostle with empty hands is an image of the entire Church... that is, an image of what the Church should be like! Just as the Apostle Paul eagerly anticipated Christ with empty hands and was focused on him... so should we do the same. With empty hands, we go to baptism and receive the adoption of God as children: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." With empty hands, we also go to Communion and receive Jesus' body and blood and are united with him in heaven. With this Jesus in our hearts, we leave here. With His hope, with His faith, with His strength, and with His future. Amen.