

Sunday October 4th, 2020
Philippians 3:4b-14

“Treasuring Rubbish”

I want to begin in a very odd place today. I have been thoroughly enjoying the work of Yuval Harari. I read his History of Homo Sapiens and am now under way in his book Homo Deus; with the subtitle “A brief History of Tomorrow”. Harari’s goal, in brief, is partly to try and understand where humanity is possibly heading given trends of the past. Throughout the book, Harari challenges our preconceived notions about what is important and why is it important.

For example: he raises the whole question of lawns. Yes, I said lawns. You know the expanse of grass in front of our homes and many buildings. Millions of little blades of green stuff demanding our attention. I recently observed my neighbour sitting for hours on end hand weeding her lawn. Got to get rid of that creeping Charlie or crab grass. Imagine the expended time and energy of this tedious activity.

Then there are the billions of dollars spent each year on: grass seed, fertilizer, irrigation, mowing and even professional lawn care. As a society, in general, we take great pride in our lawns, and frown at those whose lawns are less than ideal; perhaps they are uncut or weedy. Harari asks the question; why do we value lawns so much? Think about it?

Lawns have no economic value, as we cannot eat the grass, nor can we let animals forage on it lest they trample our perfect Kentucky bluegrass. Lawns are actually an economic liability. They also are labour intensive. Mowing the lawn can be exhausting. We would be far better economically, to do something else with the space, like grow vegetables. So, why do we value them.

You can blame our forebearers in Medieval Europe and England for lawns. Lawns were only found in front of castles or huge estates because they cost so much to maintain. Lawns were a sign of wealth. Go to any old European village, and most homes in the old part of town have no grass at all. People needed their resources to feed themselves, not grow grass. Over time as the middle class grew, others began adopting lawns to signify their economic status and it stuck.

Just think of how you react to seeing a neighbour with an unkept lawn. Surely the thought enters your mind that they must be going through a rough patch to neglect their grass. My father-in-law was a farmer, and he was asked once about fertilizing his lawn. He replied, that he did not feed anything that wasn’t a crop or could be sold. Lawns, are maybe here to stay, but with a bit of history, we see them differently, and maybe we want to change our approach to them.

A recent Reuters poll reveals that Americans, and I think this is true of Canadians as well, value “time” first, with “career,” “success,” and “money” coming in as close seconds for certain groups of people. What we value most, like a lush lawn, is likely demonstrated by how we spend our time and how we spend our resources.

At one point in his life, the apostle Paul spent all his time, and resources, pursuing and persecuting Christians, establishing along the way a successful career as a devout Pharisee. When he writes the letter to the Philippians, he has changed course, so that he now spends all his time and resources pursuing Christ. It is a dramatic turn around and his life is never the same.

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At first glance Paul's career success, which he enjoyed previously, appears to be in utter shambles, because he lands in prison for the sake of Christ. As a side note, I should have mentioned two weeks ago as we began Philippians that Paul is in a Roman prison when he writes his letter.

However, what looks like a failed career, actually contributes to the fulfillment of Paul's calling as a minister to the Gentiles, because he is able to communicate the gospel to the prison guards (2:12-18). Paul's change of course demonstrates what he values most. Paul explains that his past now helps him understand his present and future. The things that gave life meaning and purpose and gave him confidence; no longer apply to him. Going back to our analogy, Paul no longer values the "lawn", so to speak.

In our text, Paul argues against valuing the "flesh," or what he calls "confidence in the flesh" (3:4b). Fitting our passage in context, helps us to see what he means by this phrase "confidence in the flesh". Chapter 3 opens with Paul's warning against false teachers who most certainly were Judiaser, who among many things of Jewish practice and law, insisted that a person must be circumcised in order to be a bona fide member of God's people (verses 1-3).

In other words, they insisted that a person must become a Jew, in order to become a Christian. These "false teachers" saw religion as directed and maintained by external rituals. Circumcision being one of them. Consider what the false teachers are demanding. All male converts to Christianity must be circumcised. This in a day without anesthetic or antibiotics. Awfully painful for a grown man.

On a side not read Genesis 34 and see how the Hivites were tricked into having all the men of their village circumcised, and on the third day "when they were still in pain", Jacob's sons attack the Hittite village. This was all in revenge for their sister Dinah being raped.

By contrast, Paul speaks of religion, or faith, the word I prefer, that is directed by the Spirit of God (verse 3). The point is not that external rituals are wrong, but that without the Spirit's generating work, they are fruitless. Circumcision was a sign and seal of the covenant, but it was also meant to point to an inward reality, the circumcision of the heart (see Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; Ezekiel 44:7).

It appears then, that these teachers have lost sight of what circumcision of the flesh signifies. When Paul writes about confidence in the flesh, he means valuing circumcision and other exterior rituals above all other things. To illustrate further the confidence in the flesh against which he speaks, Paul uses himself as a negative example. He, himself, has more reason to boast in the flesh than anyone (4b), and lists seven advantages he could claim (verses 5-6). The first four advantages are inherited: 1) He is a full member of God's covenant people ("circumcised on the eighth day").

2) He is an Israelite or Jew by birth, with all the rights and privileges that adhere to "a member of the people of Israel". 3) Paul hails from one of the two tribes (Benjamin and Joseph) considered to be faithful to the covenant ("Paul is of the tribe of Benjamin").

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4) Paul is the son of Hebrew parents with no Gentile contamination, that is, he is not a “mud-blood”, he is a purebred (“a Hebrew born of Hebrews”).

The last three are achievements he acquired through his own efforts and education. 5) He practices strict observance of the law (“a Pharisee of Pharisees”). He was therefore very prominent. We see this displayed at the stoning of Stephen in the book of Acts. 6) Paul has exhibited avid devotion to God (“as to being zealous for the faith of his fathers, a persecutor of the church”). 7) He is above reproach according to a Pharisaic interpretation of the law (“as to righteousness under the law, blameless”).

His point is this. From a strictly Jewish perspective, Paul was the best of the best. If you wanted to know what made a good Jew, then look no further than Paul. The tables turn when Paul makes a big contrast with a little word: “But” (verse 7). When we hear the word “but”, we know something important is being introduced. Paul contrasts his old mindset and actions (verses 4-5) with new ones (verses 7-9), using the familiar language of accounting (“gain” and “loss”). The end of a profit and loss statement shows the net loss or net income, indicating the extent to which a business, craft, or household is profitable.

Paul understands “profitable” living in the household of God in terms of “attaining to the resurrection of the dead” (verses 11; see also 12, 14). In order to make a profit, he counts all his external advantages, his history actually, as “loss”, and counts knowing Christ as “gain.” Earlier, Paul had written about giving up all rights and privileges for the sake of others (2:1-4). Now he speaks about giving up all rights and privileges for the sake of knowing Christ (verse 10).

Paul values knowing Christ, because he has come to see that only in union with Christ, and not on account of his natural qualities or achievements, may he stand before God with a clear conscience. Paul wants to be “found” in Christ. This is the language of final judgment, when a person’s life is ultimately disclosed before his maker (see also 2 Peter 3:10, 14). Paul contrasts two kinds of righteousness for this disclosure: “having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law” versus “one that comes through faith in Christ” (verse 9).

He has described the righteousness from the law in verses 5-6. By contrast, the righteousness through faith in Christ, likely refers to Jesus’ obedient death on the cross. Grammatically, the phrase translated “faith in Christ” may also be translated “the faithfulness of Christ.” This alternate translation makes the best sense of the contrast that Paul sets up: not the law versus human faith; but the law (its works do not give life) versus Jesus’ obedient death (by his work, he gives life; see also Romans 8:1-4).

Paul mixes accounting imagery with athletic imagery in order to portray the extent to which he values Christ. In verse 12, he says that he has not already obtained “all this,” probably referring to the full knowledge of Christ and the resurrection of the dead that is his ultimate goal. Because his values have changed, he exerts the energy he used in persecuting the church and following the law, with which he would strain to win a race into the pursuit of Christ.

He does this by forgetting what lies behind (all those privileges and achievements he mentions in verses 5-6) and by straining forward to what lies ahead (sharing in Christ’s resurrection).

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In 1995 the Northwestern Wildcats football team had one of the most remarkable seasons in college football history. Prior to 1995 the Wildcats were the most notorious losers in the Big Ten conference and for that matter all of college football. They had set a NCAA record for losing 34 consecutive games between 1979 and 1982. They had not had a winning season in 24 years.

Then in 1995, under head coach Gary Barnett, the Wildcats finished the season 10-2, won the Big Ten Conference title, and went to the Rose Bowl ranked 8th in the nation. Coach Barnett earned all the credit he received, winning seventeen national coach of the year awards. In the spring of 1996, the team gathered to begin preparations for the new season. The Chicago Tribune tells us what happened next.

Barnett began his talk to the players in the auditorium by saying he was going to hand out placards proclaiming their accomplishments the year before. Barnett called players forward and handed the players their awards, amidst the cheering of fellow team mates. The players cheered even louder when Barnett held up a placard representing his 17 coach of the year awards. Then Barnett did something no one expected.

He marched across to the stage to garbage can marked "1995". He took one last admiring look at his award and then dumped it into the bin. A silence descended on the auditorium and Barnett stepped away from the trash can. Then one by one the stars of the team marched on stage and dropped their placards in the bin. Soon the trash can was full of placards won the previous year from the 70 players.

Barnett gave his players a valuable lesson without speaking one word. What you did in 1995 was terrific, but the calendar says 1996. I love history, especially church history. I love knowing what happened through the years to get us to where we are. We owe our forebearers a great debt. But that was then, this is now. Churches lose momentum and so do we in our own lives when we rest on our past.

The past should help us see where we have been, mindful that all of it is in Paul's words, rubbish. It is hard to hear, but we can't move forward without eventually looking forward.

In light of this text, we may reflect on what we value most as individuals and as church communities. Perhaps we tend to value certain inherited qualities or achievements as "gains" that give us value before God. Now is the time for examining our lives and our faith, so that we may count such gains as loss and deepen our reliance upon Jesus Christ. And maybe, should you choose, rethink your attachment to your lawn.

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PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, how hard it is to enter your Kingdom! Jesus taught us that the gates are open among us, but we are often blinded to their presence. Its heralds cry out to us, but we are deaf to their invitation to enter. We know we rely too often on what we see and overlook the mysteries of the unseen. We depend on what we hear and neglect the secrets of the silent.

Your revelation offers us clues in our search, O Lord, but they appear contradictory to us. In one breath you tell us that we must become like “little children” and in the next you call us leave our youth and grow in maturity.

You told our forebearers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children.” And then you tell us to “Leave your parents and your homes, and follow me.”

These apparent contradictions reveal to us that we have much to learn about following you. As children we were instructed about what was right and what was wrong: we learned about self-discipline and obedience. But you would also have us grow in spirit as we grow in body. Therefore, we know that we cannot rely on what we once knew about faith but must grow in spirit and in truth. As we mature and grow in spirit, we discover the richness of your grace and we experience the joy of plumbing the depths of your presence among us. Our foundation becomes so much firmer, we stand on the promises of Christ than simply by what we were pushed to learn as children.

One of the hardest lessons we have had to learn is that we erroneously believed that good behaviour is always rewarded and bad behaviour is always punished. Yet as the years pass and we experience more of life we realize that Jesus’ words were truthful when he said the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. And what child can truly count the cost of discipleship. No wonder so many have turned away from you, unable to fully surrender into your hands. As children we were impressed upon to know the dos and don’ts of proper behaviour. But we know it is not enough to know rules and laws. For us to know abundant living we much experience and dispense grace and forgiveness. For we know therein lies the danger that the more we trust our own righteousness, the greater our chance of becoming blind to sin. The greater our allegiance to our laws, the weaker our adherence to your will.

Above all, O God, help us to grow up. We would leave everything and follow you, but our faith is weak. Forgive us for entertaining faulty ideas that any blessings we enjoy are the result of your special favour upon us, instead of a dispensing of your grace to be shared with others. Help us to look in the mirror and be reminded that “No one is God but God.” Look upon us with love, and challenge us, “If your spirit is strong, give all that you have, and follow me.”

Look upon us with mercy, O Lord, and not judgment; and inspire in us the strength to step beyond the world of law to the world of love, where faithful existence is not for our own gain but for your glory.