

LET IT GO!

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Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14

***“I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value
of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”***

Philippians 3:8

It’s been a joy to get to know the members of our Confirmation Class: such a fine group of young men and women — smart, accomplished, caring, faithful. I predict they’ll go far: in their faith journey, and in life in general.

Just six years ago, they were in elementary school. In that year — 2013 — a movie came out that had a huge impact on kids across the country: especially young girls. It was the Disney animated film, “Frozen.” I still remember giving a children’s sermon, in my former church, on the Sunday closest to Halloween. On that Sunday we encouraged kids to wear their Halloween costumes to church. More than half the girls were wearing the powder-blue gown of Princess Elsa, hero of that film.

No surprise, there. Elsa’s an appealing character: strong, principled, possessing magical powers. For young girls, just coming into their own, what’s not to like?

Elsa has some difficulties handling those magical powers at first. They pop out at awkward moments, causing a certain amount of mayhem. It’s only when the

Princess — now a Queen — leaves home, on a journey of self-discovery, that she comes to understand who she is and what she’s been placed on this earth to do.

By far the biggest song from that movie — which all the young girls seemed to know by heart — is “Let It Go.” In that song, Elsa declares she will no longer keep her magical powers under wraps. She’ll share them with the world. She’ll let it go, come what may.

Well, there are some things in life we need to let go in order to free them. And there are other things we need to let go of, in the sense of discarding them. In Princess Elsa’s case, she couldn’t liberate her magical powers until she’d first let something else go: the constrictions and expectations of her traditional role as a princess. Elsa had to leave her old life behind. She had to venture out into the frozen wilderness, to make for herself a new life and discover her destiny.

Frozen is one of those universal human tales, in that way. It’s the classic story of the hero’s journey: of leaving something behind to discover a life of infinitely greater value.

In Philippians chapter 3, Paul writes autobiographically about a time he had to let something go — something valuable he’d treasured all his life:

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to

the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

This is Paul’s spiritual resumé: and a mighty impressive list of credentials it is. Some things on the list he was born with. Others are things he’s achieved.

He was “circumcised on the eighth day” — in other words, his parents brought him to the Temple as a newborn, to be initiated into the faith. Paul’s **“a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.”** He’s a member of God’s chosen people by birth.

But he didn’t just rest on his spiritual laurels. Throughout his early life, Paul worked hard to make himself acceptable in God’s eyes: **“...as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”**

When Paul talks of being a Pharisee, he’s bearing that title with pride. There’s not a hint, here, of negative judgment. The Pharisees were among the most serious-minded, disciplined and devoted of all the Jewish sects. It wasn’t easy to be a Pharisee. Yes, you had to know the Law of Moses and you had to be able to find your way around the Talmud (the learned commentaries). But you also had to work hard, every day, to conform your life to every aspect of religious practice. Pharisees like Paul were much admired for their tireless devotion.

But the young Saul of Tarsus — as he used to be called — went way beyond that. He says that, when it came to religious zeal, he was **“a persecutor of the**

church.” We know — from things Paul writes elsewhere, following his conversion — that he was deeply ashamed, in later life, of the role he’d played in rounding up and interrogating Christian believers, even delivering some up for execution. But in his early years, Saul of Tarsus was something more than a true believer. He was a fanatic.

Paul sums it up by saying **“as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”** As a young man, he was a fast-rising star in the world of the Pharisees. He’d mastered the religious system. He’d done everything expected of him, and more. But there was something missing in his life. There was an empty place in his heart that nothing could fill.

Nothing, that is, until he came to know Jesus. Saul was introduced to him on the Damascus Road, when a powerful experience of the risen Christ knocked his spiritual life completely off its foundations. In the words of one Bible commentator: **“Paul’s problem was not that he couldn’t make the grade; it was that he did make it, only to find out that it was the wrong standard of measurement.”**¹ Or, to recall something Thomas Merton wrote, it was as though he’d spent his whole life climbing the ladder of success, only to realize the ladder was up against the wrong wall.

¹Dean Flemming, *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, in the *New Beacon Bible Commentary* series (Beacon Hill Press, 2009), p. 240.

Paul goes on to say, **“whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.”** He’s using business language here: accounting. It’s as though Paul has put together a great spreadsheet of his life, factoring in all the credits and debits. The bottom line is undeniably positive. He’s followed the rules, he’s played by the book, he’s done everything — or nearly everything — right. He’s certain his spiritual balance sheet is in the black, by any reasonable standard of measurement.

But then he meets Christ: and everything changes. He talks of the **“surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [his] Lord.”** *Surpassing worth* — it’s as though Saul’s been accounting for nickels and dimes all those years, and Jesus comes along and offers him millions, free of charge! There’s nothing wrong with what he’d been doing, as a diligent Pharisee. It’s just that when he met a man who’d come back from the dead, a man who was surely God’s own son, everything about him was transformed.

This changes the way Paul looks at his own religious pedigree, and his earlier religious achievements. Compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, these are now not only debits — losses — they are utter garbage. The Greek word Paul uses here is a very strong and earthy term, that means either rotting food scraps or dung — something so malodorous and disgusting you wouldn’t even want to be around it.

So, what Paul had to do, in order to take the next step on his spiritual journey, was to let it go — to let it all go. He wasn't letting it go in the positive sense of Princess Elsa in *Frozen* (releasing her God-given powers). He was letting it go in the sense of discarding it for good.

Paul was able to do that, with barely a second thought, because the new treasure he'd discovered far surpassed any spiritual prize he could have earned or achieved on his own.

This is a hard, hard thing for most of us to wrap our minds around: because we've been so carefully schooled, all our lives, to value ambition and achievement. Yet — if Paul's to be believed — we have, in our Christian faith, a treasure surpassing anything we ourselves could possibly achieve. And the best thing of all is: it's a gift — totally free and undeserved. All we need do is reach out and gratefully claim it!

To do so can be profoundly disorienting. Some years ago, when I was chairing the Committee on Preparation for Ministry of Monmouth Presbytery, a second-career candidate came along who was very different from any other we'd interviewed. Larry Van Hise had been a decorated Marine fighter pilot in Vietnam, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross. He'd left the service and entered the world of banking: rising on a very fast track to become Vice-President of the Bank of

New York, in charge of their entire investment banking division. In his late forties, Larry was a veritable wizard of Wall Street — a living icon of the American dream.

His wife, Angie, experienced a call to ministry and enrolled in Princeton Seminary. She became one of our candidates. His wife's decision evidently made a great impression on Larry: because, a couple years later, he decided God was calling him to ministry, too.

He told us on the Committee of what it was like to announce his decision to his co-workers, and especially his subordinates. He said it seemed to him like a shock wave went through that bank, and he was the cause. A great many people who were just below him on the ladder looked up, and saw what he had done. It was a real head-scratcher for them. They simply had no frame of reference to understand it.

Larry was a bit like Paul in that regard. His life had a “before” and “after” aspect. The “before” was a traditional and very impressive American success story. The “after” was what happened as he stepped off the ladder of success into thin air: and discovered there *was* someone there to catch him.

Ambition is a wonderful thing. We do well to encourage our kids to be ambitious, to work hard, to make a success of themselves. Yet, we also do well to

caution them that ambition can be a two-edged sword. Even the most impressive, shimmering material success is as nothing — even trash to be discarded — compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

In his book, *The Song of the Bird*, Anthony DeMello tells a little parable about those who continually hunger for more in life.

It's a story of a humble barber who was passing by a tree one day, that turned out to be haunted. From out of the tree the barber heard a voice: "Would you like to have seven jars of gold?"

Looking around, he saw no one. He couldn't imagine where the voice was coming from. But his greed had been aroused, so he shouted eagerly, "Yes, I certainly would."

"Then go home at once," said the voice. "You will find them there."

The barber ran all the way home: and it turned out to be just as the ghostly voice had promised. There, sitting by the hearth were seven jars, six of them filled to the brim with gold — except for the seventh, which was only half-full.

Of course the barber was delighted with the unexpected treasure, but there was something that bothered him. He couldn't bear the thought of having a half-filled jar. He knew that, somehow, he had to fill it. If he didn't, he could never be happy.

So he took all his wife's jewelry, and begged his family and friends to loan him theirs. He threw them into the half-filled jar. But the jar was enchanted. No matter how much treasure he threw in, it remained half-filled, as before. He saved and scrimped and starved his family: but he could never bring the level of that seventh jar any higher.

One day he asked for an audience with the King. The King, as it happened, was one of his customers. So, he demanded that his salary be doubled. The King agreed, but still it was no good. The jar devoured each piece of gold he flung into it.

The next time the King summoned the barber to cut his hair, he noticed how desperate and unhappy the man looked. "What's wrong with you?" he asked. "You used to be so happy when your salary was smaller. Can it be that you have been given the seven jars of gold?"

The barber was astonished to hear this. "Who told you about that, Your Majesty?"

The King laughed. "I know the symptoms. The ghost once offered the jars to me. When I asked if the money could ever be spent, or was it merely to be hoarded, he vanished without a word. Take it from me: that money can never be spent. It only brings with it the compulsion to hoard. Go, and return the seven jars to the ghost this very minute. You will be a happy man once again."

And so he did; and so he was.

My friends, you will never find true joy in this life until you learn how to let it go: until, with Paul, you too will be able to say of all the glittering idols of this life, “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” So, ask him into your life — or do so again, if you’ve forgotten what that experience is like. Get to know him, and the power of his resurrection.

**“Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to Thee.”**

Let’s sing it like we believe it!

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