

18TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14

"...whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ."

REFLECT:

Hearing someone tell their own story can be powerful, and a very great privilege. Few things have the ability to open hearts and minds the way personal stories can. Many significant shifts towards social justice or peace and reconciliation have been born of individuals telling their stories.

In today's reading from Philippians, Paul is telling something of his own story. It's a story of two halves, and stark contrast. We learn that he was once an apparent religious success-story; enthusiastic, dedicated, super-confident in his own righteousness. That is until God turned his life up-side-down, exposing the hollowness of the achievements he had set such store by, calling him to accept and be defined by Jesus Christ.

Years of Christian tradition and Bible commentary have read this account in a 'supersessionist' way, heavily implying that Judaism=bad and Christianity=good; that it's Paul's Jewishness that's regarded "as rubbish" (v.8). I hope it goes without saying that such readings, though still popular, are deeply problematic. They misrepresent Judaism as legalistic and transactional, and claim 'grace' as a Christian invention. In fact, Jews view the Torah as 'gift', and both Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition are suffused with theologies of grace.

There is scant evidence in his letters that Paul renounces his Jewishness. What he describes in the short testimony given here is not a switch from one religion to another, but an account of his faith development, a journey many of us might identify with. I cringe when I remember myself as a 16 year-old conservative evangelical, confident that my virginity made me somehow 'pure', and that my alpha course theology could offer rational water-tight answers for anything life might bring.

Like Paul, I had a long way to fall, and some painful unlearning and unravelling to do before I could begin to accept the gift of grace. Like Paul, I continue to learn and grow and be transformed.

Perhaps your own faith story has involved some falling and unlearning too.

CONNECT:

What is your personal story of faith? This week I challenge you to have a go at writing it down. Or, if words are not your thing, try something else... you could draw a map, a winding road or river, with 'landmarks' along the way, for example.

I have found this to be a helpful spiritual exercise. It can be just for you, or talked through with a trusted friend. Either way, consider it a prayer. Notice: are there places where God seemed present? Or absent? Does time give a different perspective? How have you changed along the way? Are there 'raw' places? Try to 'notice' any emotions without judgment or self-reproach.

PRAY:

- For all who are anxious and all who are lonely in these strange and challenging times
- That we will be generous, non-judgmental, open-hearted listeners to others' stories
- That we will make peace with our own stories
- That we will lean into grace.

RESOURCES:

Richard Rohr's great little book *Falling Upward* is full of wisdom for the "two halves" of life. I've a copy I'm happy to lend.

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:

www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

SUPPORT:

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.