

Sermon Title: Regarded as Loss
Text: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14
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March 25, 2007
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
Fifth Sunday of Lent

Admittedly, I have neither the soul, nor the constitution of a gambler. My genetics are grounded in a mother who went to a casino, so far as I know, once in her life, on the weekend that her granddaughter graduated from college. She sat quietly at a slot machine with the roll of quarters my brother had provided, and when he came to see if she wanted to leave yet, she protested...not because she was winning, mind you, but because she wasn't *done*. She still had quarters left! Heins don't quite get the point of the whole thing!

Part of it is that Heins are just *cheap*. The notion that you could just *lose* \$20 is enough to keep us up at night. But I've been thinking lately that it might be something deeper than that. It's not just that I hate the fact that I am a probable loser with every bottle of soda, carton of yogurt, or box of cereal I open. It's not that I think there is something morally corrupt about a friendly game of cards, or that my immortal soul is somehow put in peril should I wade into the waters of sin, and buy a lottery ticket. What I am realizing more and more is that I am troubled by the underlying *story* that grounds it all: the supposition—the *feeling* that's felt as a *fact*—that I could be *happy* if I just got *lucky*.

A psychologist by the name of Steve Danish at the Virginia Commonwealth University has studied the lives of big winners, and put a name to it. "The dream you have about winning may be better than the actuality of winning," he said. "There have been families that have just — just been torn apart by this process."¹ Danish goes on to tell the stories of those "lucky winners", like the couple who won \$20 million, but whose 16 year marriage dissolved in a matter of months, or the \$25 million winner who was kidnapped and murdered by his sister-in-law. You know the stories, but still it seems we're tempted by the tale: let me strike it rich, and I can leave this miserable life behind to find happiness.

It's a story whose roots have a way of working their way into our life of faith, as well. It was, in fact, the dominant story that was told me by youth leaders with only the best of intentions: that my life had been wasted, and I was without hope unless I gave my life to Jesus and, though they shied away from the term, was "born again."

Think about it. Just how different is the notion that if I only had more *Jesus* in my life any different from if only I had that big jackpot? In both cases, I have little to no control over the cause *or* the effect, and the ante I must pay is—this is what makes it attractive—miniscule in proportion to the promised pay off. Pay a buck and win \$250 million. Let go of my miserable life and inherit eternity...the only difference, I guess, is the assumed odds of the wager, as those same well-meaning youth leaders all but guaranteed the exchange...if my prayer was sincere! But of course, that was the safety valve as well. If I quickly found my path dipping from the mountaintops of God's love to the deep valleys of life as I had always known it, then I mustn't have been quite sincere in my prayer. I'd have to buy another ticket!

¹ <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=2941589&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312>.

The trouble I've had with such a story since it was first told me is that I've not quite been able to convince myself that the hand I've been dealt in this life is so awful that my best option is to fold, and buy a raffle ticket. I hear Paul, as he wrote to the church in Philippi. It's not that the life I've been given is so terrible that the only possible redemption is to cash it all in for Door Number Three. My list would be a little different from his. I am not going to discuss circumcision, and I have no genealogical claim to the foundations of Israel's history. Truth be told, we can't get much beyond the great-great-great grandfather who left the Kaiser's army behind to set off for America and its land of promise. Old Adolf might have had reason to buy his ticket to a steamer and leave his old world behind, but I guess I'd prefer to think of it as his investment in a future he'd not yet seen, one not even for himself, but for his great, great, great grandchildren, which has wound its way across oceans and wide-flung families.

We might not know if he was German or Polish, but his brave step into the unknown has led to me, as one "late born" to borrow another of Paul's phrases, bred of strong Reformed stock, loved by parents who did their best to provide everything I needed, educated not according to the Pharisees, but with as good an education as you could ever hope for a state college to provide. Over the last almost 27 years I've been blessed to share that life with Denise, to bring two girls into this world, and hopefully shape their lives for good and not for evil. In the past eleven years you all have welcomed me as your pastor, and made me quite comfortable along the way, and though it won't amount to a Powerball jackpot, you've paid me enough to be humbling. I would make no claim as to my righteousness under the law...I *am* of Reformed stock, after all, but in the end I have to agree with Paul—if anyone has reason for confidence in the flesh, it is *me*!

So I listen carefully to what Paul might mean when he says, "whatever gains I had," and they are *not* inconsiderable, "these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard *everything* as loss" but listen carefully—not because they are of no value, but "because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." I really don't think he's saying "throw it all over and start again." I don't think his point is that all is dross because *this* is gold: to know Jesus as Lord. I *think* what he's saying is not that everything else has no value in the light of this one thing, but rather that in the light of this one thing—a grace-filled and wondrous knowledge of God's love in Jesus—*everything* else in my life is revalued. It's that through the lens of God's deep love for this world shown in Christ, I am finally able to see, not that everything else is for nothing, but that I have a wealth deeper, and wider, and more secure than anything I had ever imagined.

I realize—this is the transformative Word that seized me as I thought of Paul's words to Philippi—that the deep and true value of what I have been given is not in what profit it brings to me, but a trust just like old Grandpa Adolf, to *use* that incredible giftedness that has been handed me on a silver platter for the purpose God intends; the purpose God shows to me in Jesus: "not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me *his* own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

That is the clarion call of faithfulness: not to trade everything for a lottery ticket that might pay off in heaven, but to allow God's incredible love for this world, shown in Christ, to revalue, and

reclaim all the gifts we've been given—including all the gifts we've squandered along the way, all the gifts we've hoarded for fear that there would not be enough, if last week's parable of the two sons is to be trusted—and to set them to the purpose God intends for us: to love the Lord your God with heart, mind, and soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The interesting thing about all this is that if it is true that the dynamic of our faith is not to draw us out of a futile world, leaving behind its stain and sin, but rather to claim and refine the gifts that are already ours for the service of God in the world he not only creates but redeems, then this whole season which finds its completion in the coming week is turned on its head. Lent is not a time to “mortify the flesh” as the old language used to insist—to deny ourselves, and wean ourselves from all earthly desire so that when God draws us out, we will be prepared. It is more like the time that Jesus spent out in the wilderness between his baptism and the beginning of his ministry in earnest: a time in which all our gifts can be weighed and valued according to their true purpose, understanding what Augustine saw so clearly, that we are freest when our wills are shaped and conformed to the will of God.

It's not that everything was for naught up until I gave my life to Jesus and He set me free, but that to know Jesus is finally to understand who *we* are—how precious, and of infinite worth. It is to see our gifts, not as that which holds us down, but as that which shows us where next we need to go. It's to ask all those questions that were pressed upon us by Frederick Buechner when we started this long walk: what is of ultimate value to you? What are your God-given gifts, and how have you used them, tarnished them, turned them into weapons by which to impress your own will on the world? What would you be willing to give your life for in response to a God who poured out his own life for you?

You see, the stories that will captivate us next Sunday and through the Holy Week, from its shouts of Hosanna, to the sobs of the women at the foot of the cross, have no *magic* in them—the suspension of natural laws, that we might be entertained, or excused from living. They possess, and are possessed *by* faith, which is God's loving insistence that this world *not* be abandoned, but fulfilled. How do you best prepare? My conviction this year is that you do exactly as Paul has done: a fierce and purposeful inventory of God's wondrous gifts in your life...but when all your calculations are done, Paul says, turn the page, and write but one thing: that we know Jesus Christ as Lord, not as one who comes to cancel out our lives, but as the One who comes in the name of the Lord, that we might know life, and know it in its abundance.

Let us pray.