

The Two Halves of Life
Philippians 3:4b–14
Sunday, October 4, 2020

I've noticed lately that a lot of people seem to have a new way of talking about time. We talk now in terms of "before Covid" and "after Covid." "Before quarantine" and "since quarantine." There is this sense now that our lives and our world have been so drastically changed by this event we are experiencing, that we can't talk about our lives in the same way anymore. It's like how we talk about life *before* 9/11 verses life *after* 9/11; air travel *before* 9/11 verses air travel *after* 9/11. And actually, our whole way of talking about time is based on this kind of division – *BC* and *AD*, *before* Christ and *Ano Domine*, the year of the Lord, *after* Christ. The coming of Christ was so significant that it shifted the way in which we think and talk about time.

We do this not just on a *large*, societal scale. We talk about our *personal* lives in this way, too. For some people it's life "*before* I got married" and life "*after* I got married." "*Before* kids" verses "*after* kids." "*Before* I came to America" and "*after* I came to America." "*Before* the divorce" and "*after* the divorce." "*Before* sobriety" and "*after* sobriety." "*Before* the death of my child or spouse" and "*after* their death." Something happens that so disrupts the narrative of life (for better or for worse) that we end up talking about it like it's two separate lives. For some people it's life *before* I became a Christian and life *after* I became a Christian. But *however* we experience it, I think a lot of us can look back at our lives and identify a moment, a point where we became *different people* and our lives changed forever.

Author Richard Rohr talks about "the two halves of life." Rohr says that there are two major tasks to human life – the first is to build a strong "container" or identity, and the second is to find the *content* that the container is meant to *hold*. So the "first half of life" is spent building *structure* – our sense of identity, importance, and security. It's about establishing a home,

relationships, friends, career, community, security. It asks questions like, “What makes me significant?” “How can I support myself?” and “Who will go with me?” The first half of life values law, tradition, custom, authority, boundaries, and morality of some clear sort. It’s about establishing framework and structure. And none of this is *bad*. It’s not like we’re just waiting to get through the first half of life so we can get to the *good stuff* in the *second*. Building the container is *necessary*. Rohr says, “These containers give us the necessary security, continuity, predictability, impulse control, and ego structure that we need, before the chaos of real life shows up.”¹

So the first half of life is about building the container, establishing the structure of your life. The *second* half of life is about *filling* it. In the second half of life we discover that it is no longer sufficient to find meaning in success or status. We need a deeper source of purpose. It’s about the soul finding fullness. Not just living for ourselves, providing for our security and stability, but being connected to the whole. Living the fullness of life. Rohr says it’s about finding our real purpose and identity at a much deeper level than the positive image you present to the world. The first half of life is about living from the *ego*, what Rohr calls “the false self,” while the second half of life is about living from what Rohr calls “the true self,” this deeper sense of self. If the first half of life is about *doing* and *striving*, the second half of life is about *being*.

And the thing is, this isn’t just something that happens when we turn 40 or 50 or whatever middle age is now. Some people move into the second half of life when they’re 20, some people when they’re 80, and some people never do it. Some people stay locked in to that need for security and structure, climbing that ladder to success. They never move beyond that. They never figure out or become comfortable with *who they are*.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*, pg. 25

So while that first half of life is *necessary*, Rohr says it's also necessary to let it go and move *beyond* it. And the way this typically happens, he says, is through some sort of significant loss. Some event, person, death, idea, or relationship enters your life that you simply cannot deal with using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong willpower. We reach a moment where the framework that we have spent the first half of life building – the order and structure and achievements – falls apart or shows itself to be inadequate to address this situation that we are now facing. Basically, we come to a point where life the way that we have been living it no longer works, and we have to find another way. That not everything can be solved by working harder or getting more. In fact, we come to realize that not everything can be *solved*. Entering into the second half of life is about making room in our lives for pain, loss, ambiguity, doubt, and paradox. Not *giving in* to them, but also not *fighting against* them. Simply saying, “This, too, is part of life, and there is something I can learn from this.”

And the way that we come to this place of acceptance and enter in to the second half of life is through what Rohr calls an authentic religious experience. An experience of the presence of God in the midst of suffering and loss. To recognize that God is present *even in that*. Rohr says that there is a deeper voice of God, which we must learn to hear and obey in the second half of life. It will sound an awful lot like the voices of risk, of trust, of surrender, of soul, of destiny, of love, of an intimate stranger, of one's deepest self. When we *listen* to that voice and *trust* it, we can move beyond the need for the structure and order and status and security and certainty of the first half of life.

This is what we see happening with Paul. He is talking to the Philippians about his life *before* he came to faith in Jesus Christ and life *after* he came to faith in Christ. He talks about how, in his

former life, he was “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.” He is outlining his first-half-of-life achievements and credentials to show that if anyone had a reason to be *proud* of who they were, to *boast* in their accomplishments and their status, it was *him*. “Look who I was! Look what I had done!” But then he has this experience of Christ that changes everything. It so disrupts the narrative of his life that it’s like two different people. His life *before* and his life *after*. His *name* even changes from Saul to Paul. He can’t talk about his life in the same way anymore.

And what he refers to this experience as is *loss*. Just like Rohr talks about, Paul reaches this point where the way that he *had* been equipped to live his life no longer works. All of those things that he spent the first half of life striving for are no longer adequate to help him through the moment in front of him. And so he says, “These things that I had *gained*, I have come to regard as *loss*.” He has an encounter with the risen Christ, an intimate experience of the living God, that costs him his status and relationships, everything that he has spent the first half of life building up. He hears a deeper voice of God that calls him to risk and trust and surrender, and in listening to that voice, he moves beyond the need for the structure, order, status, and security of the first half of life.

And in the midst of that *loss*, he says, he *gains* Christ. And he gains a righteousness not of his *own* that comes from the law – from order and structure and striving – but righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. Now, that line “through faith in Christ” is actually a little tricky, because the Greek there is better translated as “through the faith *of* Christ.” He has a righteousness that comes through the faith of Christ. So it’s not even about *his* faith in Christ, it’s about *Christ’s faith in him*. What’s happening here is that Paul is coming to see everything

in terms of *gift*. *Grace*. It's not about his achievements or what he has accomplished or how hard he strives. His focus is no longer on himself and what *I* have done. It is on *Christ* and what *he* has done, what Christ has *made possible* in him. Paul's relationship with Christ has moved him beyond himself, his abilities, his status, his achievements to where he sees *everything* as a gift from God.

Over these past few weeks that we have been looking at Paul's letters to the Romans and the Philippians, we have been guided by a quote from theologian Israel Kamudzandu, who says, "The main challenge of our time is to live with a transformed mind, a mind that is open to the other and leads to inner transformation. It is crucial for Christians to consider each human being as a loving partner on the journey of life, and to live each day beyond the self." So we've been looking at what that means, to consider each human being as a loving partner on the journey of life – even those with whom we disagree – and to live each day beyond the self. And the way that we've talked about it is to say that "living beyond the self" means living for this other person. Placing my needs and preferences aside and focusing on the wellbeing of the other. And there's nothing wrong with that. We're definitely called to that.

But there's something *more*. What Paul shows us here is that living beyond the self does not just mean living for this other person. It *also* means placing my needs and preferences and desires aside to focus on *Christ*. To live *for Christ*. It's about shifting our focus from the *self* and what *I* have done and made possible through my achievements and order and striving to a focus on *Christ* and what *Christ* has done *in me*; what *Christ* has made possible, and what Christ *wants* me to do. It's about recognizing that *everything* is a *gift*; that every single situation, every single *person* has the capacity to teach us something and draw us into closer communion with Christ. This experience of pain or loss, this person you disagree with, this difficult relationship, God can

use that situation to teach you something, whether it's patience, self-control, generosity, forgiveness, something that will draw you into a deeper dependence on God.

And when we can make that shift from focusing on the self and living for the self to focusing on Christ and living in Christ, then it will *naturally result* in living for others. Because when we experience that grace and understand everything as a gift, then we cannot help but want to share it with others and be towards *them* the way that God has been toward *us*.

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day on which Christians around the world partake in the Lord's Supper, sharing Christ's body and blood *together*, as *one*. But our communion this year looks a little different than it has in the past. Because we cannot even physically share communion with *one another*, much less our brothers and sisters around the world. So how can this experience of loss teach us and draw us into closer communion with Christ and with one another?

The Lord's Supper is not just about the *physical* communion that we share – the physicality of the bread and the cup or our presence together. It is also about the *spiritual* communion that we share – that God is with us and we are with one another, connected to the whole Body of Christ across place and time through the power of God's Holy Spirit. Communion makes God's presence and God's grace physical and tangible for us, but it also reminds us that the physical, tangible world is not all there is. There is something deeper that binds us to God and to each other. So even though we cannot share it here together, it still reminds us of our connection in Christ. And it gives us hope for the day when we *will* be together, gathered at table, sharing a meal in the Kingdom of God.

And so in that sense, communion is an act of living beyond the self, because it makes us mindful of our inherent connection to God and to each other. That we are *never* partaking in this meal alone. But also, when we come to this table, we are acknowledging that we need more than we are able to secure and provide for ourselves. There is a nourishment and strength that comes from God, without which we are empty. Communion is about the ways that we look to God to provide for our lives. And God *does* provide, not because we strive hard enough to earn it or deserve it. It is a *gift*, an experience of the grace of God. A *taste* of the second half of life. And when we *receive* this as grace, we will be found in Christ, and Christ will be found in us. It is *all* a *gift*. So let us give thanks for it together. Let us pray.