

“Aligning Our Hearts Voluntarily” (Aligning Our Hearts 3 of 4)

a sermon based on

Philippians 3:4*b*-14 & Matthew 2:1-14

and delivered on-

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World Communion Sunday

at

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Last week we began a new sermons series: *Aligning Our Hearts*. As I mentioned, the idea came from a stewardship meeting and reflection on a devotion by Rick Warren on what he called the Four Heart Attitudes for Giving. Last week, the focus was on thoughtfulness – that is being intentional and using the intellect that God gives us not only to discern how much to give to the church or other charities, but how to live our lives. This week, the message is *Aligning Our Hearts Enthusiastically*.

To that end, let us begin by going back to that passage from Philippians which we heard before the Gospel reading. In that passage, Paul begins by talking about his reasons for confidence in his actions. He wasn't just a good Jew, he was an outstanding Pharisee devoted to following all the rules of righteousness and even seeking out those who didn't to put them in their place. He "knew" that he was pleasing God. Right?

Of course then there was that little incident on the road to Damascus when, on his way to find Christians to arrest for not being faithful to God's covenant with Israel as he "knew" it to be, he was struck blind, and then sent to a local leader in the church, Ananias, to receive prayer and healing. In his devotion, he closed his mind AND his heart to the new and exciting thing that God was doing through Jesus Christ.

So, when we hear this passage from Philippians where Paul reminds us about these things, it's intriguing to see the change that came over him. Now he says,

"(W)hatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ." (Pp 3:7-9a NRSV)

In other words, "What I would have thought to be burdensome or even oppressive, now I see exciting opportunity, not by what I've done or will do but in what Jesus Christ is doing and will do for and through me, even if I don't know the particulars right now."

I sort of think of it as that excitement of opening up a gift wrapped package, full of hope for what lies inside, willing to fight through childproof packaging and excesses of tape and packing material, ignoring the paper cut or the chipped tooth from chewing through the ribbon.

Have you ever had those packages? Those ones that really make you work at getting to what's inside? And then the joy? Right?... Right? At least if it was what we'd hoped for...

But, what if looking at the package you can just tell that it doesn't contain a Red Rider two hundred shot model air rifle with a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time? Then what? Do we even bother? Do we go through the motions just to get to what we want even if it might mean shooting out an eye or being blinded to how plentifully we've been blessed. {aside: For those who didn't follow this bit about a BB gun, it was a reference to the movie, "A Christmas Story," in which the protagonist, Ralphie, has been pining for and plotting to receive a BB gun for Christmas, which just isn't there under the tree with the plethora of gifts that Santa delivered so that for all he had he felt nothing but disappointment, even though he'd awakened that morning enthusiastically waking his parents for the big event. How many blessings – how much joy did he forgo – merely by going through the motions which each gift that didn't fit his idea of what he thought was imperative to his happiness?

When I was nine or ten, maybe eleven, years old, my folks arranged for my brother and I to attend our first big league baseball game. I remember getting on that bus outside the Alpha Park Library in Bartonville, Illinois filled with boys (I don't remember any girls) excited about the trip to St. Louis. I wasn't quite as excited – to say the least. Why would I want to go to Busch Stadium to see a baseball game rather than Wrigley Field? My brother, the Cardinals fan (bless his heart), didn't see the same problem, with this plan.

“But a Cubs vs Cardinals game. C'mon. You have to see it somewhere.” Except... the Cubs weren't playing in St. Louis that day. Instead, the Expos would be in town. To make matters worse, the Cubs needed the Expos to lose so that they could move into first place. Not only was I going see my first major league game in St. Louis rather than Chicago, but I had to root for the Cardinals to win. The agony.

I'm not exaggerating about the agony. I actually cried when my dad made me get on that bus. I sulked as I sat in the cold sterile plastic seat in that boring concrete stadium looking out at a field covered in AstroTurf rather than lush green grass festooned by an ivy covered wall. I didn't appreciate the taste of my first ballpark hot dog.

Except for a foul ball that landed in some empty seats behind me, I can't remember anything about that game. I don't even know who won. I didn't appreciate getting to seeing the future Cubs great Leon Durham play.

I was fortunate to have parents who had the means and desire to give me the experience of attending a Major League baseball game, but my lack of enthusiasm stole my opportunity for joy – my refusal to appreciate what I had and my obstinate refusal to let go of my concept of the perfect trip to a ball game – stole my joy.

I don't think Paul was ever happy in his suffering. I don't think Paul was rejoicing when he was stoned and thrown over a wall – left for dead. I don't think Paul liked it when he realized that he couldn't earn his way into righteousness after working so hard and for so long. That's not an easy thing to experience.

However, when he experienced the grace that Jesus Christ offered by suffering himself, by even dying on the cross and then rising again in Resurrection, he got excited. What it meant was that anyone could find life in Jesus Christ. What it meant was that for all those people not fortunate enough to be born into a home of Pharisees or not fortunate to be born a Jew – a child of God's chosen people – that they too could know the fullness of God's love.

Even though he couldn't know exactly how the Holy Spirit would transform hearts, he knew that he would, and that got him excited enough to give himself fully to the Gospel, trusting that even in beatings and ridicule, God in Jesus Christ would use that moment to bring hope to someone else.

He could have easily rejected that opportunity. He could have said, “I'm content with following the Law and being a son of Abraham.” He could have been like those tenants in the parable that Jesus told, who – although they had no land of their own to farm – turned against the owner even killing his son rather than returning a portion of that which allowed them the capacity to have anything. Ultimately they ended up with nothing – not only nothing but no hope.

This happens to us as human beings. We get so distracted by our sense that there must be rules to follow to achieve what we desire, that spend our time and energy going through the

motions so that we can get what we wanted or holding on so tightly to what we think we need that we lose everything.

Who knows? Maybe that's what happened to D.B. Cooper and why he was never found. Maybe he held on so tightly to that bag of money that he couldn't pull the rip cord on the parachute. Who knows, right?

When we put our trust in Jesus wonderful things happen. When look at each moment as possibility rather than merely a barrier or obstacle, we come alive.

For those tenants in the parable, paying rent would have been an opportunity to have a crop in the next season, but that's something the landlord demands. None of us typically get excited about paying taxes, forgetting that you only income tax if you have an income, you only pay property taxes if you're fortunate to own property, and we only pay sales tax when we have something to spend. But we do those things reluctantly at best. Don't we?

Instead of demanding, however, our God in Jesus Christ invites us to be a part of his kingdom. When we realize that it can lead us into a new enthusiastic way of participating in the kingdom. When we align our hearts enthusiastically, we realize that Sunday mornings aren't about forgoing an extra hour or two of sleep but that it is when we get to come together in God's presence. When we align our hearts, we realize that we get to be a part of the church's mission in our community and world through the portion we return to God. When we align our hearts enthusiastically, we realize that get to be Jesus' hands in the world when we serve one another. When we align our hearts enthusiastically, even the past can be transformed. The old Busch stadium is gone, I am privileged to have had an experience that no one else will ever have. I can see that now.

I can't – you can't – no one can achieve righteousness on their own; but we don't have to – instead we get to be righteous and to have what we do and what we give bring hope to the entire world. That's something to be excited about. AMEN.