

What Matters

But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God.

Gal. 6:14-16

What matters? Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters at all, but a new creation. End of story. The last word. The parting shot. At least, so Paul winds up his epistle to the Galatians. And I thought that undoubtedly rather belligerent proclamation might be a good word for this Reformation Day, which, we should not fail to take notice, also falls during the 450th anniversary of the year of the death of Martin Luther. And it is well for us, I trust, to hear once again some of Luther's words on the matter from his 1535 lectures on Galatians:

It is amazing that Paul should say that in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. He should rather have said: "Either circumcision or uncircumcision counts for something, since these two are contrary to each other." But now he denies that either one counts, as though he were saying: "We must go higher, for

What Matters

circumcision and uncircumcision are far too low to count for righteousness in the sight of God. They are, of course, contrary to each other, but that has nothing to do with Christian righteousness, which is not earthly but heavenly and therefore does not consist in physical things. And so whether you receive circumcision or do not receive it is all the same, for neither counts for anything in Christ Jesus.”

Now I suppose few if any of us here lose much sleep today over the question of circumcision or uncircumcision. It is not likely to turn up on the scale of family values that our politicians crow about. Indeed, not only does the issue of one versus the other not matter at all to us, but the whole question itself seems strangely parochial and of no real concern.

But let us stop and ponder the matter a bit. The fact that the question doesn't matter to us is likely to mean, in the first place, of course, that we don't take the Old Testament very seriously. Or even further, if the question itself is of no concern for us, then is it not likely that the great promise of this text, that which really matters — the new creation — will be of little concern as well? For surely the only thing that displaces circumcision is not anything so pedestrian as unconcern, but the new creation. Make no mistake, without the new creation what is there but circumcision or uncircumcision?

Frankly, the aim of this parting shot in Paul's epistle is to put an end to the matter of what really matters once and for all. Nothing matters now but the new creation, *nothing!* All avenues, all escape routes are closed. Luther put it nicely: “With the two terms ‘circumcision’ and ‘uncircumcision’ Paul excludes everything that belongs to the whole universe and denies that it counts for anything in Christ Jesus.” The God of all grace and mercy whose intention it is to relate to us through faith and trust has (you might say) two big problems with us — both of which destroy the relationship God purposes.

One is quite obvious. It is the problem designated by “uncircumcision,” or the problem of our lawlessness, our existence among the lesser breeds without the law, our immorality and waywardness and heedlessness, even our temptation to boast in it. We are all aware

enough of such things to acknowledge the problem and to recognize that it destroys faith and trust.

But the other problem is more subtle, and mostly hidden from us, especially at this place. It is really the main one that Paul wrestles with in his letters. It is the problem of the “circumcision,” the problem of our lawfulness, our morality, our holiness, our so-called sanctification, our do-it-yourself religions, and all of that. What we don’t see is that the “circumcision” destroys the relationship of faith and trust as surely as the “uncircumcision.”

So now God has acted finally in this very proclamation by his apostle to have his way with us. God has taken the whole business out of our hands. Neither your lawlessness nor your lawfulness, your immorality nor your morality, your unholiness nor your holiness — none of it matters a bit now, but a new creation. Indeed, in most radical fashion, Paul announces not only that it no longer matters but that it is now exposed as sin! “The scripture consigned all things — good and bad! — to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” “Whatever is not of faith is sin” (Gal. 3:22; Rom. 14:23). All escape routes shut down. There is nothing to be done now but just listen. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule.

On Death to Self

Matt. 17:22-27 and 26:47-56

We speak a good deal during Lent about that supreme mystery of our faith, the death to self. For, as we have heard, he who would save his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life for Jesus' sake shall find it. But what does that really mean — to die to self? Does it mean, perhaps, selling my car and going on foot or by bus? It might. We can't rule out the possibility. Does it mean, perhaps, selling my good clothes and furniture so that my wife and I should sit around in rags on orange crates? It might. Certainly we can't dismiss that possibility either. For the problem is that unless words like "dying to self" are translated into some kind of action, or something that actually happens — that is, some real change — they don't have any real meaning. So we certainly must try, eventually, to translate them into the language of action.

But before we get too hasty and impatient there are some things at which we should take a hard look. The first is that we have a rather incurable tendency always to refuse to really listen to the words of God and instead to translate them immediately into something *we* are going to do, indeed, *can* do. This is what we always do with the law. We take it and translate it into a do-it-yourself kit for salvation. It is as though we think we are going to do God a big favor by living up to what is demanded of us and even, possibly, put him out of the salvation business by accomplishing all or at least some of it ourselves — even if that turns out to be just a teeny-weeny little bit. But when we do that we really

On Death to Self

come a-cropper when we come to this word about dying to self. For what can that possibly mean in a do-it-yourself religion? Here God has set a snare for us in our easy confidence that we are big enough to handle the job. For this is a word that we find difficult to handle. We find ourselves forced either to ignore it — which we mostly do — or to try to cut it down to size so we can handle it — maybe by selling our car or our furniture or our clothes. But even then we can't rest too easily with it, for we are never quite sure that that is enough. For however much discomfort such actions may cause us, is that really dying to self? They may be just another means of keeping myself in the business of doing God big — or little — favors, and thus of protecting myself from really hearing the words. The trouble is that the self keeps getting in the way.

But what then does it really mean? When considering this question, I was struck by some of the incidents recorded in our texts for today. For here we have the picture of Jesus on the way to *his* death. His disciples are with him, and are apparently figuring that they are going to have a hand in what is about to happen. They want to go along. They want to help out, to do their bit in the business of bringing in God's kingdom, even, as Peter says in Mark's account, if that means sacrificing their lives. But the really difficult thing for them to take, as I suspect it also is for us as "religious" people, is that in the final analysis there is absolutely and utterly nothing they can do. When Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem, Peter wants to do something about it. He sets himself in the way and says, "God forbid, Lord! Don't do it! Don't go!" Peter wants to do God a favor — to protect and preserve the Messiah and his kingdom. But Jesus looks at him and says, "Get thee behind me Satan! For you are hindrance to me, you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mark 8:33). This, Jesus says, is something that must happen; it is going to happen because God wants it, and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it.

And at the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane when the crowd comes out against Jesus with swords and clubs, they still want to do something. They still want to do their bit for God. They want to take up the sword and risk their lives, perhaps, and fight. One of them grasps a sword and cuts off the ear of one of the assailants. But Jesus will have

none of it: "Put up your sword," he says, "for there is absolutely nothing you can do!" In Luke's account, Jesus even stretches out his hand to *undo* what the disciples had tried to do — he heals the wounded man. At that point, no doubt, everything within us cries out in protest along with the disciples. Is there nothing we can do? Could we not at least perhaps stage a protest march on God's behalf? Could we not seek, perhaps, an interview with Pilate? Could we not try to influence the "power structures"? Something — however small? But the unrelenting answer comes back, "No, there is nothing you can do, absolutely nothing. If there were something to be done, my Father would send legions of angels to fight!" But there is nothing to be done. "For how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it *must* be so?" And when it finally came to that last and bitter moment, when these good religious men finally realized that there was nothing they could do, they forsook him and fled.

Can you see it? Can you see that hidden in these very words, these very events, is that death itself which you fear so much coming to meet you? For there is nothing that the old man — the self which must die — fears so much as having *everything* taken out of his hands. When they finally saw there was nothing they could do they forsook him and fled before the awesome truth. You, who presume to do business with God, can you see it? Can you see that this death of self is not, in the final analysis, something you can do? For the point is that God has once and for all reserved for himself the business of your salvation. There is nothing you can do now but, as the words of the old hymn have it, "climb Calvary's mournful mountain" and stand with your helpless arms at your side and tremble before "that miracle of time, God's own sacrifice complete! It is finished; hear him cry; learn of Jesus Christ to die!"

Can you see it? Can you see that really the last, bitter death is there? That in that cross God has stormed the last bastion of the self, the last presumption that you really were going to do something for him? Can you see that the death of Jesus Christ *is* your death? He has died *in your place!* He has done it. He made it. He created a salvation in the midst of time and his enemies. He is God happening to you. It is all over, finished, between you and God! He died in your place that death which you must die; he has done it in such a way as to *save* you. He has borne the

On Death to Self

whole thing! The fact that there is nothing left for you to do is the death of self and new birth of the new creature. He died to make a new creature of you, and as he arose, to raise you up to trust God alone.

If you can see it, perhaps then you can see, or perhaps at least begin to see, what is the *power* of God's grace and rejoice. For that is the other side of the coin once you have gotten out of your self-enclosed system. Then perhaps you can turn away from yourself, maybe really for the first time, and look upon your neighbors. Maybe for the first time you can begin to receive creation as a gift, a sheer gift from God's hands. And who knows what might happen in the power of this grace? All possibilities are open. You might sell your car, or even give it away — for someone else. You might find even that you could swallow your pride and stage a protest march — for your neighbor — or begin to seek to influence the power structures! For in the power of his cross the way is open! The way is open to begin, at least, perhaps in faltering ways, in countless little ways, to realize what it means to die to self. For that, in the final analysis, is his gift to you, the free gift of the new man, the new woman, the one who can live in faith and hope, for whom all possibilities are open!