

“The Central Mystery, Part 4: Victory”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for April 22nd 2018 (Fourth Sunday of Easter)
by Foster Freed

1st Corinthians 15: 50-58

Let’s begin...let’s begin by acknowledging the close connection between the opening verses of this morning’s reading...

...a reading that brings to a close our four-week look at the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians...

...let’s acknowledge the close connection between the opening verses of this morning’s reading, and the final verses of last Sunday’s text. Both deal with transformation: the transformation that is central not only to Paul’s conception of Christ’s resurrection, but also the resurrection Paul envisions for humanity. Resurrection for Paul is no mere extension in time but is, rather, the promise of a qualitatively different mode of existence. That much was clear last week...but here, in the portion of the chapter immediately following, Paul caps his argument by insisting *flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable*. No: humanity-transformed is at the heart of the resurrection promise. And having made that point...

...having insisted upon the immeasurable difference between the life we presently know, and the resurrection life to come, Paul then uses a favorite word of his (and to be honest, a favorite word of mine) to describe the qualitative difference between our present state and that which awaits us. *Lo, I tell you a mystery*: a word which I have borrowed from Paul in order to describe the resurrection as not just a mystery but the **central** mystery of the Christian life. And I realize...I realize full well:

To state that a central theological truth is to be regarded as a “mystery” can raise suspicions in many hearts and minds including, no doubt, some of your hearts and minds. For at least some folks, talk of the “**mysteries** of faith” is seen as a convenient way for clergy and theologians to acknowledge that they have absolutely no idea what in the world they are talking about, without having to come right out and **admit** that they have absolutely no idea what in the world they are talking about. In our defence, however, I would argue that the word “mystery”—used in the way Paul is using it here—is actually a word offered in humility. Surely there is something refreshingly honest when a theological writer confesses that he has no easy explanation for the puzzling realities and promises to which he alludes. And surely there is no shame in proclaiming the resurrection of Christ...proclaiming with a steady voice and a confident demeanour, the transformative nature of the renewal God in Christ is planning to accomplish...but at the same time making it perfectly clear that God’s work lies far beyond our finest concepts and our most carefully crafted language. And so yes: for me there is nothing troubling as Paul classifies the promise of resurrection as a mystery; it is a promise he fully expects to see realized and yet a promise he will not pretend fully to comprehend. A mystery! A mystery indeed!

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Perhaps more troubling...perhaps more troubling than Paul's use of the word "mystery", is his use of the word "victory", as this chapter reaches its climax. And no: it's not merely the use of the word, "victory", but the fact that he uses it almost as a boast, that some may find unsettling. He writes:

When the perishable puts on the imperishable...

...Paul is still speaking here of the transformation he anticipates in the human future...

...when the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written...

...a saying, incidentally, that Paul, in effect, "creates" by bringing together a text from Isaiah with a text from Hosea, producing a saying that reads:

*Death is swallowed up in victory!
O death, **where** is your victory?*

...it's impossible to read this out-loud without sounding like you are, in fact, boasting...!

*O death, **where** is your victory?
O death, where is **your** sting?*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives **us** the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*

And yes: it is most certainly the case! It is undeniably true! If you are wary of anything that smacks of Christian triumphalism, it's probably safe to say that Paul's closing flourish in this 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians, is going to go ring somewhat uneasily for you! How might one respond?

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I suppose...I suppose the first response that ought to be made...

,,I suppose the very first response that **needs** to be made in light of the the undeniably triumphalistic nature of Paul's language, is to acknowledge that there are forms of triumphalism—Christian or otherwise—that do leave a very bad taste. Perhaps that has always been the case...but we are especially sensitive in this post-modern era: an era in which we have developed a great deal of wariness, anytime an individual or group (religious or otherwise) claim to have a corner on the truth. Were it the case...were it the case that Paul is here claiming victory for his side in a two-sided dispute between human parties...

...were he insisting that his team, his clan, his tribe were going to win some struggle against a foe, I would be the first to distance myself from Paul. In point of fact: whatever else Paul stood for, it can confidently be maintained that Paul's entire mission and ministry was devoted to the incorporation into God's people as full-fledged citizens, those previously thought unworthy of such incorporation. In short: the victory Paul celebrates at the climax of this chapter, is a victory Paul sees God achieving on behalf of **humanity as a whole**. Death—rather than the Roman Empire...death—rather than the Jews...death—rather than the patriarchy or the bourgeoisie or the refugees is the enemy God ultimately will vanquish: doing so on behalf of rich as well as poor, male as well as female, Gentile as well as Jew. Surely the celebration of such a triumph is a very different matter than a celebration in which I “lord” it over others because my team has won...and their team has lost. There is so much more at stake here than the victory of my tribe over other tribes! What Paul celebrates in this chapter is of universal interest: a promise God has made on behalf of all humanity and all creation. Nor can we lightly retain our toe-hold on the Gospel, if we attempt to jettison that promise. That promise is central. That promise, far from being on the periphery of the Gospel, is at its very centre.

And I realize...I realize full well, that it is possible to remain loyal to the Way of Jesus Christ even if you no longer believe in the promise: even if you no longer believe in the God who has made those promises. At the heart of the project most closely associated, in this United Church of ours, with dissident minister Gretta Vosper, at the heart of her project is the insistence that one can work for truth, for justice, for the triumph of the way of love, even if you consider the promise itself to be an illusion...even if you believe that God is an illusion. And you know: I have a grudging respect for those who have the intestinal fortitude to strike out in that direction. Speaking personally, however...

I fail to see what the scriptures of the Old and New Testament can really contribute to such an endeavour. That there are good and sincere and loving and justice-seeking people who remain loyal to the Church as an institution, despite their loss of faith, is by no means something that ought to be treated with contempt. But that the Bible—from start to finish—seeks to form a people whose justice-seeking is grounded in allegiance to the God who **has** made promises, leaves me wondering how this particular book and the tradition to which this particular book gave birth, adds anything of value to the witness and the work of those who no longer believe in either the promises of God nor the God who made those promises. And yes: if the big promise made within the pages of our big-book—the promise of a time when God will be “all in all”—is an empty promise, why would anyone continue to place those promises at the heart of worship and at the heart of life itself. We all know the look in a child's eyes when their parents break a promise to them; why would we expect to feel any differently about a so-called god whose promises, ultimately, are destined to go unfulfilled?

That also explains, incidentally, why Dante's great trilogy is known not as *The Divine Tragedy* but as *The Divine Comedy*. If you are looking for a religion that is

ultimately tragic in its disposition, you've come to the wrong place. There are, in this world, religions that are essentially tragic in their outlook; Christianity is not one of them. The Christian religion is ultimately a comic affair: not because it's a laugh-riot, but because it's arc points toward ultimate resolution. Think of the great Shakespearean comedies; even what may well be Shakespeare's sweetest comedy—*As You Like It*—begins in exile, and only gradually moves toward its final resolution, symbolized in a wedding ceremony that involves the joyful bringing together of not one, not two, but three happy couples. The great sweep of the Biblical narrative moves in precisely that way, starting with humanity's exile from the Garden, moving inexorably toward the end of that exile at which point God—in Christ—will have reconciled all things to God. If that promise is fraudulent...if that promise bears no tangible connection to the reality of the world in which we live: in short, if we cannot—with our brother Paul—anticipate God's triumph and, in anticipation, **celebrate** God's reconciling triumph over the forces of chaos and confusion, I suspect we have very little worth celebrating in this place. It's not for nothing that we gather, on this fourth Easter Sunday, on an occasion traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday. What would we call a shepherd who could not, in the end, protect the sheep who have been entrusted to him? Would we really choose to call that shepherd good?

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A final thought...a thought prompted by the final little exhortation with which Paul concludes this chapter: a final exhortation that may at first strike us as almost anti-climactic. That final exhortation consists of nothing more than an appeal for the Corinthians to get busy with the work that is theirs. *Therefore my beloved sisters and brothers*, writes Paul: *be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain*. If you wanted to be snarky you could almost summarize that final exhortation by simply saying: "Look busy, folks: you never know when the boss will show up!" Fair enough...but I want to argue that there is a lot more going on in that final exhortation than meets the eye at first glance.

You see: I am mindful, here, of the accusation sometimes hurled against those—like Paul—who wish to ponder the things of heaven. Outsiders to the Church will sometimes disdainfully speak of "pie-in-the-sky" religiosity; even insiders to the Church will worry about those—including those clergy—who are reputed to be "so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." But the point Paul is making here, is that the real obstacle so many of us face when we seek to muster the strength and the courage to pursue the "earthly good": the real obstacle isn't "pie-in-the-sky" theology or "heavenly-mindedness". No! The real obstacle is the hard-to-shake fear that our labors are in vain, because our lives are ultimately meaningless as in that oft expressed ditty: "life stinks...and then you die"...a sentiment with which Paul himself was no stranger, given his comment (made earlier in 1st Corinthians 15) that *If the dead are not raised "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die."* That statement stands in perfect contrast with Paul's parting shot, in which he turns it on its head and says that since God's promises are most certainly true, since God's promise will be fulfilled, since the dead shall be raised,

our labors are not in vain: none of them will be lost, because nothing we do on behalf of the Gospel...nothing we do on behalf of God's good creation, will be done in vain.

And you know: for me—as I glance around this sanctuary at the faces gathered here...for me that's a kind of bottom line. When I think of the energy and imagination, the dedication and the loyalty that has been expended by those who gather this day for worship...

...educators and laborers, doctors and nurses, artists and poets, builders and defenders of the peace, farmers and home-makers, scientists and engineers, pastors, chaplains and missionaries...

...when I ponder all of the love expended by the members of even one small community of faith, the thought that any of it might be wasted, might be in vain, might be all for nought...serves as a powerful reminder as to why the Gospel of Christ—the promises of God—remain such good news, such bracing news: such life-giving news...

...and why those promises serve as such a strong foundation for the life we live here and now: in this time, in this place.

Death is swallowed up in victory!

*O death, **where** is your victory?*

*O death, **where** is your sting?*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives **us** the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Amen!!