

October 8, 2023
Lectionary 27, Year A
The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Philippians 3:4b-14
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Surpassing Value

Last Sunday Britton and I weren't here at Emmanuel because we spent the weekend visiting our older daughter, Abigail, at her college, Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, which is in central Pennsylvania.

We had a harrowing drive to Susquehanna last Friday, when torrential rains were rolling through New York, Connecticut, and heading toward you here in Massachusetts. While we were driving toward New York City, the city itself was experiencing damaging flooding as the rains fell. A drive that usually takes us 7 hours, including stops, took us almost 10. But on Saturday morning we woke up to beautiful blue skies and a lovely day.

A highlight of the trip for me was getting to attend one of Abigail's classes with her, a class that she was taking for her Church Music and Christian Ritual minor.

When I was in college, I would have never imagined that a day would come when I would be excited about attending a two-hour class that started at 8:00 a.m. on a Saturday, but there I was Saturday morning sitting in the hallway of the Cunningham Center for the Arts, outside the classroom, fifteen minutes early for the 8:00 a.m. class and eager for it to begin.

And it did not disappoint. The professor was kind, welcoming, and engaging and he clearly had a great rapport with his students as well as a great knowledge of his subject matter.

There weren't any huge surprises to me in the lecture, but still, it was great to get to hear the overview that he gave of the history of liturgy and music in the

Christian church across denominations. There's always something to learn, even about subjects that we think we know well.

My college Roommate, who my family and I call Roommate, or for the kids, Auntie Roommate, drove from Baltimore to spend the weekend with us and it was great to spend time with her as well as Abigail.

We got to meet one of Abigail's closest college friends, Liz, while we there and have dinner with her and her father, who was also there for Family Weekend. We got to see a show that Abigail was working on backstage in the costume and make-up departments. We also got to go to chapel with Abigail, where she has a leadership role in almost all of the services because she serves as a sexton for the university chapel.

All in all, we had a wonderful weekend, but lest you think that this sermon is just going to be a trip review, let me tell you about something that happened as we wandered around the campus.

As we walked through the Campus Center and the academic buildings and the chapel and Abigail's dorm, Britton and I were reading all of the fliers that were hanging up on the walls, announcing an overwhelming number of interesting things that were going on on campus.

There were lectures that sounding fascinating, concerts and recitals that sounded wonderful, opportunities to be entertained and to get involved; shows to see, people to listen to, things to do, clubs to join.

For reasons that pass understanding we started to tell Abigail about things we were seeing, as if she didn't walk by the same fliers every day of her life. But still we kept pointing out to her things that we thought that she might be interested in; opportunities that she had to grow and to learn.

But as I took in everything that there was to do and to join, I started to feel a feeling that I suspect is a very familiar feeling to people living in the 2020s. I

started to feel activity overload and its close cousin called FOMO, also known as Fear of Missing Out.

I felt it vicariously, as I don't live in central Pennsylvania and am not a college student, so the posters and announcements for the most part, weren't directed at me and many of the things that were being announced weren't intended for me to attend or join, but still I felt it on behalf of my daughter.

Even over the course of the weekend, we had to make some tough choices. There was just so much to do.

Should we go to the presentation for parents about the study abroad program or should we go to dinner with Abigail's friend and her father? We decided to go to half the program on Study Abroad and then to dinner with Abigail's friend.

Should we go to the orchestra concert or the play? We would have enjoyed going to both but, obviously, we chose to the play that Abigail had worked on, but it would have been nice to see both.

Should we go see the soccer game for an hour or spend that hour hanging out in our hotel room watching a football game on TV. I think that we made the wrong choice and that we should have gone to the soccer game, but we ended up in the hotel room instead. It had already been a long day and we were tired, so we didn't do much of anything until it was time for us to go to the play. Because sometimes you really do just have to rest.

In in the epistle for today, Paul tells the Christians in Philippi, and, therefore, us, his credentials. This is a man who had never missed a lecture, a man who never missed an opportunity to make himself the man who his parents, his grandparents, all of his ancestors hoped he would be.

He had an impressive bloodline. He says he was, "a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews." He made the most of that background, committing himself to the study of the Torah and the interpretation of the law, becoming a Pharisee and a defender of the purity of his

faith, persecuting the church when Jesus followers threatened the interpretation of his religion that he had committed his life to.

Paul was a man who never missed out, never missed an opportunity to better himself or to prove himself. And yet, in spite of everything that he was and everything that he had done, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul said this, “Yet whatever 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.” (Philippians 3:7-8a)

Imagine that. Paul had everything going for him. Bloodlines, background, education, status, power, and yet, when it came right down to it, he was so overwhelmed, so blown away, by the amazing power and love of God that he had encountered in Jesus Christ that everything else became meaningless to him. He said, “For [Jesus’] sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...” (Philippians 3:8b). For Paul, Jesus had become the one central thing in his life.

And it wasn’t because his life was empty and needed to be filled up. Paul had a good life, a full and fulfilling life. He was an important person, a wise person, an educated person, a person who people looked up to in his community. And yet he was willing to turn away from all of that, for what he calls the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord.

As we were walking around on Abigail’s campus in wonder and amazement about all of the opportunities that there were for her, far more than anyone person could do in one semester, in one year of college or even four years of college, or even in one lifetime, it struck me that many of our lives are like that. There is so much that we could be doing, so many opportunities, things to learn, hobbies to pursue, trips to take, people to catch up with, work to do, degrees to get, ways to serve. It can become overwhelming, no matter what stage of life we’re in.

Our son, John, who started high school this year, is involved in a drama

project called Fantasy Footsteps, and at school he's involved in the Dungeons and Dragons club, and the fall play, and the school acapella group. He's also planning on joining the French club and the chess club when they get started. But he had to make a tough decision not to join the Jazz Choir, because he needs time to rest and to do his schoolwork.

Our son, Cyrus, warned us that it was a bad idea, but still we signed him up for three teams this fall, two soccer teams and a basketball team. And if it hadn't rained so much this fall, he certainly would have ended up letting one of those three teams down by not being able to show up for games.

Why did we sign him up for so much? Because we didn't want him to miss out, miss out on the opportunity to develop as a player, miss out on the opportunity to play with his friends, miss out on the opportunity to make new friends. But it was probably too much.

There's this nagging sense that we have as parents, as people, that we can't let any opportunity fall by the wayside, that we have to go, go, go. Fear of missing out used to be about the fear that some of our friends were doing fun things without us. Now I think that it's less about social anxiety and more about development anxiety. Not the worry that people leaving us out, but more about, "Am I missing a chance that might never come again?" A chance to learn, a chance to travel, a chance to have fun, a chance to develop as a person, a chance to meet new people, a chance to grow?

I think that that worry has gotten worse since the pandemic too. Because for a period of time we were missing out, we didn't have the kinds of opportunities that, maybe, pre-2020 we took for granted. So maybe we are, as a culture, catching up, working harder not to miss out, knowing that we can't take any opportunities for granted.

And yet, in all of this busyness, that we impose on ourselves and on our children and grandchildren, what are we missing? The chance to rest, the chance to

go deeply into our relationships, the development of quality that comes from focusing our energies rather than quantity which looks like saying yes to everything? What are we missing that Paul found, that he saw as so valuable that he was willing to put aside all of the other things that had filled up his life and consumed his time and his energy?

We know that for many people and sometimes for ourselves, what we are missing is the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ our Lord. We're missing time and space and priority to our relationship with God.

In Christ, what Paul found, and what we find is an acceptance that is so deep, that it is not based on our accomplishments or skills or talents, but simply on our being.

In Christ, what Paul found, and what we find is an invitation to rest when we are weary of chasing the never-ending desire for more that has been the hallmark of humanity since its very existence began.

In Christ, what Paul found and what we find is a hope that reaches beyond the grave and promises eternal life, that we don't have to create for ourselves.

In Christ, what Paul found and what we find is a love from which can never be left out, a love of surpassing value, found in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.