

In our epistle reading for this morning, the Apostle Paul compares his pre and post conversion life. Before the risen Lord literally knocked him off his high horse, Paul was an exemplary citizen, religious and otherwise. He had every reason to be confident in the flesh – that is to boast about his upstanding life.

Meeting Jesus, however, changed everything. Everything about his life that he had considered good, he now saw in a different light. As he says, *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. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish...*”

What is Paul saying here? First, Paul is not devaluing life. This is not about abandoning real, creaturely life as we actually live it in favor of some super spiritualized relationship with Jesus. People who yearn to get married but have not yet had the chance, or perhaps blew the chance, are sometimes told just to be satisfied with Jesus. True enough on one hand, but a little company in the flesh doesn't hurt either. We are not meant to be purely spiritual beings. We are created by God to live as part of the created order that He called “good.”

God delights in our delight in the world He has made. For me, October is the month. As the weather cools, the brook trout come back to life. You marvel, yet again, at the impossibly blue sky - the light clean and clear, the leaves just going gold over pastures that are still lush-green. You bite into a Red Delicious or an Albemarle Pippin you've just picked on a crisp late afternoon; this year's harvest is especially succulent.

You drive back home through the canopied country lanes as the day gives way to the gloaming. You've got Beethoven's 6<sup>th</sup> – his Pastoral – thrumming through your speakers. Just ahead, you have the promise of the first fire to warm your outsides, and a true and smoky single malt to warm your insides. You share the fire and the whiskey with the one who still makes your heart race, even 26 years after you bent your knee on a rolling October foothill and asked for her hand with a ring made of wildflowers. You were a student then, and you had no money, but she didn't care. These

are the moments when you agree with the bumper sticker/tee-shirt slogan: “*Life is Good.*” It certainly isn’t rubbish. As we read on the first page of the Bible, “*God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.*”

I’m sure that St. Paul felt this way about moments of his pre-converted life. I’m sure he thanked God for, as the Book of Common Prayer says, “*those accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.*” And yet, of course, life has moments, even seasons when it is not good. There are times when “Life is good” feels like a cruel judgment on someone who is in grief over a daughter’s death, or someone who is wrapped up in the dark of depression, or who is still looking for a job years two years after his walking papers were handed to him.

And even if life’s big hitting thugs (accident, trauma, death) haven’t sucker punched you yet, there is still the existential angst of one leaf going from gold to mold, dropping forever from a naked branch, down to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, “we all fall down.”

Life is good, but when you freight it with too much ultimacy, it gives way. It can’t sustain your deepest needs, your deepest desires. Life cannot save you, temporally or eternally. When you try to derive your ultimate “value” from either your accomplishments or enjoyment of life, life will no longer be good. In terms of saving you, life is of no more value than “rubbish.”

Ernest Hemingway was a man who lived life to the fullest: all that life could offer, he devoured. And yet, it wasn’t enough, evidenced by his suicide in 1961. There is a story about the writer, which serves a visual for what I’m trying to say here about life. Once in Bimini Hemingway returned to the dock close to midnight in a jubilant drunk only to find his 514-pound giant bluefin tuna that he’d fought for seven hours ripped to shreds by sharks. This would, of course, become the inspiration for *The Old Man and the Sea*. But at the time Hemingway just pounded his fists over and over into the strung-up raw meat in moonlight the way prize-fighters in the gym slam at the heavy bag.

All too often, life goes the way of the tuna. And in the end, even if we live to be 102, we all go the way of the tuna. We need more than just life. Robert Capon says it this way. “*The world cannot be saved by living. There are two devastatingly simple reasons why. The first is, we don’t live well*

*enough to do the job. Our goodness is flawed. I love my children and you love yours, but we have, both of us, messed them up royally. I'm a nice person and so are you, except for when my will is crossed or your convenience is not consulted."*

In other words, life may be good, but you and I are not. And that leads to Capon's second reason why life cannot save. "*The world's deepest problem is not badness as opposed to goodness, it is sin, the incurable tendency to put self first, to trust number one and no one else. And that means that there is nothing – no right deed, however good, noble, lawful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent (sounds like Paul's litany of his pre-converted life) – that cannot be done for the wrong reason, that cannot be tainted and totally corrupted by sin.*"

We need more than our life to save us. To delight in this life, in fires and apples and whatever floats your boat, we need, like Paul, *the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord*. Knowing Him as your Ultimate Good is what makes life good.

To know Christ Jesus as Lord is to know love and forgiveness and grace. To know Christ Jesus as Lord is to know that though you have messed your children up royally, but in Him we all have been forgiven and in Him all shall be made well. To know Christ Jesus as Lord is to know that your depression will give way to joy and that your dead daughter will be raised and be seated right next to you at the Everlasting Feast, and you will look on her and weep with awe and wonder and you will not even remember that there was a night, or that you ever trusted in yourself rather than the One who raised your daughter from the dead even as He was raised and is now seated right at the center of the Lamb's Supper pouring the wine and filling your glass Himself. And, I'm pretty sure that Beethoven's 6<sup>th</sup> will be on the playlist.

Your life, as good as it may be, will not get you a seat at the Supper. You will need more than your life. You will need another's life. More than that, you will need another's death. To be found at that table, you, like Paul, will need to trust in Christ, to be "*be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.*"

What does this mean – to have a righteousness not of your own? A righteousness of your own is one based on your life, the mixture of noble and corrupted, the good and the bad. To have a righteousness from God based on faith is to have a righteousness that comes to you as a gift, totally apart from your life.

Here's an illustration. Imagine that you die and go to be judged on your life. You're led by St. Peter into a movie theater. He sits you down and offers you popcorn and coke. Then he says, "We've got a way to judge whether you'll go to heaven or the other place. We're going to show a full feature film of your entire life. If the good you've done outweighs the bad you've done you'll have a seat at the Supper of the Lamb. Vice versa and you're going down." You choke on your popcorn, spill your coke and slink despondently down into your seat.

Then Peter says, "And, oh, we've got a special surround-sound here that will broadcast everything you've ever thought as well. All the things you kept secret from others. Every tainted and wrong motive of your heart will no longer be hidden. Every thought you thought when your will was crossed." As the curtains open you know its curtains for you. The opening credits begin to roll, much to your horror.

But as you watch the film begin, the strangest thing happens. You wonder if there is some kind of mistake. Instead of your life being judged on the screen, you see the life of Jesus Christ unfold before you - His birth in a manger, His healing of the sick and befriending of the sinner, His forgiving of the betrayer. And finally at the climax the movie, you see His death on the cross that he died for you, and the empty tomb so that you could have Life.

Do you see it? As you trust him, all that is His is credited to you. And then you are taken by the hand and led to the table where every sorrowful tear is wiped away and every eye is clear and every heart is full and all of life is good. Amen.