



## MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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March 3, 2010  
Midweek Lenten Worship  
Pastor Randy Ott

### **More Precious Than Life**

One of the neat things about being a pastor is getting to go to your home church and preach. You get a chance to stand in the pulpit that you worshiped in front of for those many years and see what it looked like when you were asleep. It's kind of a neat thing to go back to your home church and stand in that pulpit and see some of those faces that have aged, perhaps, and to be able to worship with them and lead them in worship. It's really a cool thing in the ministry.

You kind of wonder if that was one of the mountain top days for Jesus when he walked on the face of the earth or if that was one of his pinnacle experiences, his glory experiences. Do you ever think about that? What were the glory days that Jesus had? He went back to the synagogue where he had worshiped growing up in Nazareth. They handed him the scroll as an honored teacher. He gets to that place and reads the passage about what the Messiah would do. He rolls it up and hands it back and looks them in the eye and says, "Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He told all the people that he knew growing up that he was their Savior. That had to be pretty neat.

Maybe you think of one of the glory days of his ministry being when they were out there on the mountainside, that grassy place, and there's no food around. There's no Kwik Trip around. There's nothing they can do to get the food for the people. He takes five loaves of bread and two little fish and feeds 5,000 men, not counting the women and children. People kind of ooh and aah at his amazing power. You wonder if that was one of his glory days.

I don't think so, because you can remember the rest of the story of those days, the crowds of those thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people Jesus had to send away disappointed because they wanted him to become a king that would fill their bellies; he wanted to fill their souls. So he had to send them away so he could be alone and be away from those people that no longer had any use for him when he said "I am the bread that has come down from heaven."

After the people were amazed at his powerful teaching in his hometown synagogue, do you remember what they did to show their appreciation? They wanted to take him out to a cliff and throw him over it. I guess those probably weren't the glory days then, right?

Christ gives us an insight into what his true glory days of ministry were. He says, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds*" (John 12:23-24). That gets explained even farther in this amazing conversation he had with his Father publicly where they heard him talking back and forth to the Father where he prays, "*Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!*" Then a voice came from heaven, "*I have glorified it*" (John 12:27-28). Jesus points to his glory as his suffering and his death, what he was willing to endure for us.

He is telling us his glory is what we just read, taking his disciples off and saying, "Guys, something bad is going to happen. Let's pray. Watch and pray so you don't fall into temptation. I am going to go over here and pray. You stay here and pray too." And they fall asleep on him.

Then one of the guys that he had spent three years with, teaching and instructing, brings a crowd, and how does his people respond. They try to start a war and cut off a guy's ear. Jesus has to say, "No, no, no. That's not what it's about." Then he watches them all run away. He watches the one who was so full of bluster deny him three times. He stands in front of a mock trial in front of the high priest, in front of Pilate. He suffers all this indignity. He takes this punishment that he had done nothing to deserve and he does it willingly, and he tells us that's his glory. Those are his glory days. Those are the glory days of his ministry. The Father echoes it and tells us, "That's right. Pay attention to that."

From the time he first shed blood for us at his circumcision until the last time the blood dripped while he was on the cross, through all his perfect obedience in our place and his suffering and death in our place, we see his glory most clearly in his willingness to give his own life because he loved you and he loved me more than he loved his own life. That's the glory of Jesus. He considered that neat, or more important than his life.

Now as we gather together, we have a chance to come to the same conclusion through the power of God's Spirit. We heard those words from Paul where Paul tells us, and we'll look at them a little bit more, that his life was not as important as Jesus. Once he came to know the power of Jesus, once he came to know the fullness of Jesus, Jesus became more important than life.

But you know that wasn't always the way with him. That guy that was named Saul had no use for Jesus. He probably wasn't in the crowd shouting crucify him, but he certainly would have wanted to be. He tells us that his life was consumed with zeal for God and he felt the best way he could show his zeal for God, his love for God, was attacking those who followed Jesus Christ. He gave his approval and held coats so they could wind up and throw their stones a little bit harder at Stephen. He went around arresting

Christians and seeing to it that some of them no doubt were put to death. He tells us, *"If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless"*

(Philippians 3:4-6). He was the kind of pharisee that every Jewish mother wanted their little boy to grow up to be. He was "it." If they had a Jewish Illustrated Weekly magazine, he would have been on the cover. That's who he was. He was proud of it.

He would have stayed proud of it all his life except one day, the Lord came along and kicked the pride out of him, didn't he. He was on the way to Damascus to arrest some Christians and the Lord really stops him in his tracks, blinds him, I suppose as a way of showing him that he had always been spiritually blind, and says, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul says, "Who are you?" "I'm Jesus, the one you are persecuting." Through this conversation, a very real part of Paul, or Saul, dies. His self confidence dies. His confidence in his legalistic righteousness by observing the law dies. He is confronted with the enormity of his sin. He was trying to separate people from Christ and terror upon terrors in his own heart, he may well have succeeded and pushed people off the cliff that led to hell, and he has to deal with that. He has a guilt that passes all understanding to deal with. Part of him dies. (See Acts 9.)

For three days, he remains blind and can contemplate this. Then one of the Christians he had gone to Damascus probably to arrest, Ananias, is sent by God and restores his sight. Part of Saul certainly died, but part of him was raised to life also. He came to the knowledge that not only was he the worst of all sinners, the chief of all sinners as he called himself, but that Christ loved him anyhow and that Christ lived in his place and died in his place anyhow. When he became convinced that what Jesus did for the world was also done for Saul, when he came back to life, when he had this new spiritual life, he was a changed man. He was willing to put his life on the line and endure anything for the sake of the Gospel because he wanted people to know Jesus like he knew Jesus. He says, *"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith"* (Philippians 3:7-9). That truth changed him and it changed who he was and what he did. Now he became the apostle to the Gentiles, the man known as "Paul," who would put his life on the line to do what he thought was the most important thing he could do, to risk his health, to risk his life, to risk his welfare so that others might come to know Jesus Christ.

One time when he was under attack by some so-called super apostles who were in Corinth and causing him all kinds of problems, he wrote in his second letter to the

Corinthians about these so-called super apostles. *"Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers"* (2 Corinthians 11:23-26). The one who once boasted in his own works now boasts in Christ when he says, "My boast in Christ is so great, I'm putting it on the line and backing it up in my life," and he did.

Tradition tells us that Paul ultimately paid the ultimate price for his devoting himself to Christ. When he says, "I consider everything else a loss compared to the greatness of knowing Christ," he wasn't whistling dixie. History tells us that he died at the hands of a Roman emperor for no other reason than that he proclaimed Christ crucified. Christ crucified was more precious than life to Paul.

That's a neat story that Paul's got, but what about you and me. We have never been dropped down on our knees in the dirt as we walked some place. You and I were never struck blind by God and had some guy come back and miraculously give us our sight. We didn't die and then rise again like Saul did, did we?

Of course we did. We didn't see a blinding light. In fact, it was probably just a little light coming in, maybe through these very windows, light from maybe these very fixtures. We weren't lying in the dirt on the ground, sweaty from riding on a donkey. We were probably being held in the arms of someone who really loved us. We might have seen the light. We might not have. Our eyes might well have been closed as that three handfuls of water were poured on our forehead and our sinful nature was drowned and we were clothed and raised up in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. We died to sin and were raised to righteousness. For many of us, it's from that point on that the Spirit worked in our hearts a faith that recognizes that Jesus is more precious than our life.

Now, through our study of the Word, we probably have that understanding that nothing in this world is going to compare to the importance of knowing Jesus and being in Jesus and being in faith in him and forgiven and covered in his righteousness. Each of us individually knows our own sins. We know how little we deserve any of this from God, that we are too the chief of sinners. Yet, sometimes it's harder to have that practical knowledge of this that is put into practice because we live in a sinful world. There are things that happen to us in this sinful world that will lead us to question God's plan for us. "God, why did you let this happen to me? Why did you let that happen to me?" This relationship problem; that financial problem; this work problem; this health

problem...we look at it and say, "God, why?" That's when we have to kick back to this idea that Christ is more precious than anything else that happens to us in our lives.

Paul had that as a gift of faith from God. When he wrote these words that I read to you to the Philippians, he was writing from a prison cell. Here is the guy that had all these travels and his greatest desire was to plant new churches. Now he is confined, chained probably, possibly even to a soldier sitting there. He can't go in and out. He wants to plant churches and he's planted. But one of the things that is amazing, if you read the letter to the Philippians, it's all about joy, rejoice, and joy in the Lord. There's no "God, why did you let this happen? I can't go serve you now." He understands that this is where God wanted him to preach now. His proclaiming Christ crucified now was going to be taking place not on the open highways and byways, but talking to Roman soldiers who were a captive audience to him. So he sees that opportunity and shares the Gospel of Christ where he was.

That's why he says, *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead"* (Philippians 3:10-11). He's not talking about sharing in Christ's suffering to pay for sin. He knows that's already been done. But he knows that if you are in Christ and he is more important than life, there will be times where God will call on you to suffer something. That's a part of being connected to the One whom the world hates. And when he plants us in a spot where it means we face those kinds of sufferings, this is then where God has called us to serve. This hardship, this health problem, this financial problem, this employment problem, whatever it is that we are facing at this point in time that wants us to throw up our hands and say, "Why" and then whine, in reality it's a way where we can show other people that Christ is more important than life to us. "This problem in my life is not bigger than the God who loved me and took away my sins. This problem in my life is something that God's power will help me to get through." That's why he talks about wanting to know the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him. That only happens as we spend more time with the Word and the Sacraments and his Spirit gives us a strength that is not our own. We don't have that kind of strength. It's got to come from outside of us. It comes in our Savior. He is more precious than our life.