Topic: Knowing Love Supreme (Season of Lent 5, Lectionary C)
Scripture: Psalm 126, Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4-14
Hymns: vu421 Lead On O Cloud, BB382 Be Thou My Vision, vu142 Jesus Keep Me, BB186 Old Ruggest Cross

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Let’s take a moment to pray…

Lord, before this world's days even began, your Word was in the beginning, and it was with you and it was you. The mystery of that brings us to our knees. Yet today you allow us to open your Word and know you better. So, we ask that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Give us hearts open to your Spirit as we seek you. AMEN.

(SLIDE) Sociology is the study of human society, with a focus on behaviour, interaction, and relationships. Recent sociology by Scott and Marshall distinguishes that there are three groups or categories of social status. There is (SLIDE) Ascribed Status... which is a status that a person inherits or receives. When I say "I am Canadian", this is an ascribed status.

I inherited that by being born in Canada, from Canadian parents. If you immigrating here you receive citizenship. You are thus, Canadian. Next is Achieved Staus... which is earned and enjoyed by virtue of your accomplishments. A good example is a doctor, or a lawyer.

They went to school, put in their time and effort and came out with something in the end. In this case, a high paying, well respected job. The final category of social status is Master Status. Master status is the uppermost category and surpasses the other two.

When Paul is describing himself in his letter to the Philippians, we can see him putting himself into these various categories. (SLIDE of 3:5) "**circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews**". These first four descriptors Paul labels himself with are his Ascribed Status.

None of these are descriptions he achieved of his own accord or accomplishments. Paul can't give them up, either. They are permanent labels. You, here today, will always be Canadian... even if you immigrate somewhere else. These ascriptions Paul received at birth and they are markers of prestige in some ways.

Paul was born with a religious silver spoon in his mouth. He received a superior form of circumcision - that is he was circumsized not when he was 13 years old but on the eighth day after his birth.

Through climbing in status as a citizen of Israel, a member of the tribe of Benjamin... he ends up with a distinctive cultural rank... Not all Israelites spoke Hebrew, not all conformed to Hebraic customs - some slipped into Gentile ways of living. Paul is strictly observant of all Hebrew culture and living... thus he is a "Hebrew of Hebrews".

Then Paul takes us to his Achieved Status markers (SLIDE of 3:5 as to the law). He was the son of a Pharisee, that he did not choose, but he did elect to become one himself... and not just any Pharisee either. As the Pharisees are the strictest sect of Jewish living, Paul has concerned himself with just that. He has charged himself with enforcing the most demanding standards of purity and living to separate himself from all that is unclean in the world.

(SLIDE of 3:6) Paul then moves to describing his Master Status. Paul's religious credentials far surpass that of being just any Pharisee. He hasn't only separated himself from all that is unclean in the world, but in his zeal he has tried to erase uncleanness in general.

The mere idea of a persecuted Messiah to a Pharisee was a scandal fit for a campaign of terror to be launched - and Paul launched one. He has been on a mission to eradicate any blemish from the faith, which included at the time, the church even to the point of persecution.

(SLIDE of 3:7) However, we all remember Paul's conversion experience. We remember him encountering Christ, losing his sight, wandering the roads on the way to healing. While Paul does not forsake his status markers, Christ turns his world upside down and Paul no longer places any confidence in the flesh.

Those markers, by the standards of Christ, are more or less emptied before the cross. The Ascribed, Achieved, and Master status pale in significance because of Christ. Indeed, Paul then goes on to expand his column of losses.

"**What is more**", he writes, "**I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him**".

To Paul, who has at this point known both sides of extreme Judaism now to the limits of Christianity, every alternative means of salvation is reduced to nothing... only one thing matters and it is this... (SLIDE) a love supreme ("knowing Christ Jesus"), a personal confession ("My Lord").

The worth of knowing Christ is beyond measure... while we were yet lost sinners, He died that we might live. In Christ the God who owes us nothing has given us everything. To quote Isaac Watts in his classic hymn... "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all".

To "gain Christ", as Paul puts it involves three things: it is a gift once received, it is now presently enjoyed, and stands out as the future goal. Gifted, Enjoyed, Goal, or better yet... Past, Present, and Future.

And what is it to "gain Christ"? In the mind of Paul, the judicial end of humanity comes in the form of the just condemnation of sin. God does not allow sin to survive, we know this from Revelation. Evil does not win, sin does not make it to the new heaven and new earth. Sin's destruction is accomplished through the sacrament of Christ standing in our place.

When Christ stands in our place, the innocent for the guilty, divine mercy towards lost sinners prevails and there is no compromise to God's righteousness and judgment. In so doing, Christ's sacrifice does two things at once...

The innocent One, Jesus Christ, takes the place of the guilty many - we know this as "substitution", while the sins of the many are removed by the blood of the innocent One - we know this as "atonement".

The many are made innocent by an innocence not their own. You and I receive innocence in union with Christ by grace through faith, apart from our merit or our works. And isn't that a wonderful and blessed gift?

Doesn't that sound so much better than our Ascribed, Achieved, or Master Status markers? Paul certainly thought so. He'd rather gain Christ than have any status at all. Paul would go through a hundred times losing his sight, losing his family, losing all his friends...

All in order to gain Christ. The gaining of Christ is worth that much to him... and it should be to us, no less. Each of us here today can likely attest to something or someone we've lost to gain Christ.

There is a life of sacrifice embedded in this faith of ours. The gift IS free... and here is the mystery of it all... the gift is free, but when we accept it we should be ready and willing to shed all those things that keep us from gaining Christ.

All of our markers of nationality, all of our inherited and learned characteristics, all of our achievements mean nothing before the cross of Jesus... and all those choices we made and make, all the things which tell us we stand above the rest never stand above Jesus Christ, the Messiah and King... God Incarnate, the Word made flesh.

There is no master above Him. And it might be hard to see while you navigate this world... and it might be difficult to keep your eyes on as one bad thing happens after another... and it might seem like the divine promises aren't being kept...

And it might feel like God is absent... and it might look like you're a fool standing in a crowd of intelligent scoffers... and it might be painful when your wallet is empty and the plate comes around... and it might feel blasphemous when the faithful aren't doing it the way you think it should be...

But to gain Christ (PAUSE) Paul counted everything before that as loss.

Simple. As. That.

Simple as that for us, too. Because what could possibly compare to (POINT TO SLIDE) a love supreme, and a personal confession of a Saviour who died for you?