

Sermon for Sunday, September 27, 1970 by Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"SOMETHING IN BETWEEN"

Philippians 3:4-14

Text: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."  
(Philippians 3:7-8)

By the time I got out of the service and back in college, I suddenly realized that my grandmother, of whom I was very fond, was growing quite old and feeble. She kept talking about that area of Mississippi where she had been born and raised and where all of her family had been buried. It was obvious that in her heart she wanted to go back one final time to see with her own eyes and walk with her own feet those cherished places of a time forever gone. I think there is in all of us something that turns our hearts homeward to youth, to childhood, to loved ones when the years grow long and the time left grows short. There is that yearning within us to return to the sources of our lives, to touch base once more with the beginning, to relive one final time those places and events that shaped us and molded us into what we have been. So, one day I put my grandmother in the car and took her home for what proved to be her last trip back. How strange it was to try to imagine with her how it must have been, what it had been like. But I could not see the faces she saw; I could not hear the sound of voices that fell on her ears; I saw only the tumbled remains of an ancient fireplace where she saw a whole house peopled with friends of the past. I saw only a dusty little country town with most of its buildings long since boarded up, with only faint indications of the last coat of paint still remaining on weathered boards, with the tin roofs stained by time and in some places popped loose from the nails and curled up in rusty pain, and the whole place rotting away in the hot Mississippi sun. But for her it was a place young and new for each building came alive with warm memories. "There's the candy store and the general store..." and her voice would trail off in fond reverie. She was separated from me by more than 70 years for I saw only what was now, while she saw what had been. Last of all we went to the cemetery. The iron fence around it was rusted with age and here and there leaned precariously. The once proud gate lay open, hanging on broken hinges. It was an old cemetery and mostly unkept. Some of the tombstones had fallen over, some tilted at odd angles and most of them were dark and stained from the sun and rain of many years. It was a sad sort of cemetery and only here and there did some freshly tended grave indicate that someone still remembered and still cared. Grandmother knew her way about that place, though. Without hesitation she walked first to one grave then another and introduced me to my ancestors whom I had never met before. To me they were only names cut in stone, but to her they were friends and loved ones, people very real. Grandmother seemed oddly relaxed and at peace here and suddenly I knew why. She was at peace with life and with death; she was at peace within her own heart; she was at peace with God. As she stood now close to the end of the journey, she could look back to the beginning and the time in between had been good, it had been worthwhile, and here among her loved ones she was content with it all. Between the beginning and the approaching end with her life, she had carved something in between.

Recently this little event with my grandmother was brought back to mind. A member of my former congregation had a brother-in-law who was a Methodist

minister. But he was more than a preacher for he was a poet as well. Recently he passed away and his sister-in-law shared one of his poems with me. It is entitled, "Thoughts in a Cemetery" and it goes like this:

I wonder if my tombstone  
 Standing on the green  
 Will only give my birth and death  
 And nothing in between?

So many million men have lived  
 Who now no more are seen,  
 Who've left a tale of birth and death,  
 But nothing in between.

I care not for the span of life,  
 Nor for the marble's sheen,  
 Just so they may, 'twixt birth and death,  
 Carve something in between!

This raises the question of what life is all about. What is life all about for you this morning? When the time comes to carve your name in stone and to record the date of the beginning and the end for you, what would you like to see carved in between? Would you like for them to record, "He accumulated a million dollars. May he rest in peace"? Would you like for your marker to read, "He owned a lovely home in the right section of town and had two cars, a Buick and a Cadillac, in his garage"? Or how about this, "Excellent bridge player, handi-cap golfer, avid football fan. Sleep in peace." Or perhaps this would appeal to you, "He always looked after his own interests first. God rest his soul."? Or how about this, "Dun and Bradstreet thought well of him. Amen."

Yes, what is life all about? What would you like to see carved in between? Many of us are concerned about certain things--about belonging to the right crowd, giving the right appearance, doing the right thing, projecting a certain kind of image. The young people of today don't buy our values. They see through the sham and falseness and pretensions of it all. And while their protests may not be very mature and often are not constructive, yet the feeling they represent on the part of today's youth is certainly deep and intense.

Yes, what is life all about? St. Paul was a man with all of the proper credentials. He had the proper background, he had the right family, he did the right things, he acted in the acceptable way. As he put it, "If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless." With those credentials a Jew simply couldn't be more Jewish. Yet, St. Paul goes on to add, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." Yes, what is life all about? What is really valuable? St. Paul said life is being in relationship to God; life is living in relationship to Jesus; life is living in obedience to Jesus. As St. Paul put it, "Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." I suppose between the date

of his birth and the date of his death, St. Paul would want carved on his gravestone these words, "Knowing Jesus, he lived for Him."

Knowing Jesus is truly costly business. It takes you out of the usually accepted patterns of society. It stamps you as "different" or as St. Peter once put it, a peculiar people. (I Peter 2:9) To truly know Jesus relates you to life, to others, in an entirely different way. Your interests change. The patterns of your life change. To be related to Jesus may even change your friends. Yet, in spite of all that he gave up, in spite of all that he surrendered that he had once counted important, he did so gladly. Many of us have been to see the classic picture, "Gone with the Wind". One of the most vivid scenes is that of Scarlet O'Hara standing in the barren fields looking up to heaven. As she stands there she has a certain kind of grit and determination that commands our respect. Yet, in this moment she is more detestable than lovely. She has had to go without, to be actually hungry and to know real want. She has had to surrender all of the things that made her life wonderful. Yet, as she stands there it is with bitterness over what is gone, over what is no longer hers. She swears that she will never go hungry again, not even if she has to steal or kill. What a far cry her words are from the words of St. Paul, "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ."

Paul gave up a lot for Jesus. He gave up health. The rigors of travel in those days were hard. Paul was constantly on the move, under great physical strain, and it took its toll. Paul spoke of his mysterious malady as a thorn. If you have ever tried to travel when you were not well you can imagine what Paul endured. Paul gave up living his life by what others thought. He had to learn to live without the approval and plaudits of the crowd. Paul loved appreciation as every one does who is really human. Surely he loved to be loved as we all do. But whether people approved or disapproved the only one he sought to please was Jesus. Once people made Paul so popular that they regarded him as a god and even wanted to offer sacrifices in his honor but this did not stop him from proclaiming Jesus. And then when those same people wanted to stone him to death, still this did not stop him from speaking of Jesus. Paul gave up his freedom for Jesus. He was eager to be out in the wide world. He was a great traveler, moving from place to place. He wanted to go everywhere preaching the word and he even had his eye on distant Spain. Yet, though he longed to be free, to come and go as he pleased, he could do without freedom and spend long months in prison for Jesus' sake.

St. Paul said life was all about knowing Jesus. As he put it, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." How could Paul give up everything for Jesus--what had he discovered that enabled him to gladly sacrifice all for the sake of knowing Jesus? I am sure there are many reasons that might be included, but let me suggest two that I think must have been basic. First, he found religious certainty. He could say, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." He could say, "One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Every man is restless and discontented, possessed of gnawing hungers and burning thirsts that cannot be satisfied

except by God alone. Paul had found religious certainty--he had found the bread of life that satisfied his hunger; he had found the water of life that quenched his thirst. But second, not only had he found religious certainty, he was convinced that God was adequate for all of his needs. He once wrote, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God." And he believed that. He could endure bad health; he could endure the loss of approval of friends; he could endure the rigors of travel or endure the confinement of prison, all because he was sure that God could use every experience of his life for his own enrichment and for the enrichment of others. Believing that God could change every tragedy into triumph he could endure all things.

Helen Heit was a brilliant foreign correspondent during World War II. As she was making her way out of France after its fall in 1940 she met a young Frenchman whom she had known in other days. To her utter amazement she saw a radiance on the face of this friend that was in sharp contrast to the bitter gloom that was on the faces of his fellow countrymen. "What does it mean" she asked, "Why do you look so radiant?" "The world is being wrecked," he answered, "But I am going to have the privilege of helping to build it back." Because he had religious certainty and because he believed that God could change tragedy into triumph, here was a man who would carve something in between.

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Nor for the marble's sheen,  
Just so they may, 'twixt birth and death  
Carve something in between.

Yes, what is life all about? Paul says it is living for Jesus, carving something in between because one can suffer the loss of all things when he has a religious certainty to stand on and a confidence that God can turn every tragedy into glorious triumph.

That day in the cemetery my grandmother was strangely content. As she stood at the end of her life, she could look back over the years with satisfaction. She had lived her life for Jesus and at the end she still trusted him. Between the beginning and the end she had spent her life well--she had spent it for Jesus. In the process she had written something in between.

There is birth and there is death--and all you have is what is in between. How will we spend it--how will we use it--that's the real question. God grant that each of us may carve something in between.