

“The Loss of All Things” / Philippians 3:4b-14 / 5 October 2014

“Things,” the Apostle Paul says, “Things, I've suffered the loss of all things,” and he's happier without them. Once, years ago, I was hiking in the mountains east of here. It was early October, and every step along the trail yielded broad new vistas out over the autumn countryside far below. Miles of red and yellow woodlands, dotted by an occasional church spire. It was a waking dream. I had hiked about six miles uphill and met not another soul that morning, aside from two wizened old women who looked as if they were just part of the forest. They might have emerged from the hollow trunk of a tree, with their kind but unsmiling eyes, their wide craggy faces, their straight and unadorned silver hair. I seemed to have all the world to myself. Near the summit, there was a mountain pond, about four acres in size, where—seeing no one about—I took a chilly dip. Just as I was sunning myself dry on the rocks, about a dozen hikers filed past, and I realized how deceptive that feeling of solitude can be.

On my way down the other side of the mountain, I encountered an elderly couple; their accents told me they were Welsh. They both looked to be well into their 80s, and they'd already hiked a good distance uphill. They were moving slowly and struggling over the rocky trail. The man asked, “How much further up to the pond?” (“Ah, so everyone knows about the pond,” I thought.) I replied that it was about three miles. The man looked at the woman, who trailed behind him, and he asked, “Can we make it?” She made a dismal face, but didn't answer. I admired their grit, but they'd come unprepared. They had no water; they were wearing the wrong kind of shoes. Whether they pressed on or turned around, they had a hard trek ahead of them. Although this happened long ago, I already had the pastor's urge to fix people's problems for them. “Oh,” I said, “you need walking sticks. Hold on, let's just find you some nice sticks to help you keep your balance over these rocks.”

Now, a real hiker loves his stick. I have a vast collection of walking sticks that I've gathered from all over the country, and each of them holds a special place in my heart. I select one lovingly every time I go to the forest; each of them excels for different kinds of walking. On that crisp fall day, I was in such a hurry to hit the trail that I'd forgotten to take a stick. But at the foot of the mountain, I'd discovered that a generous soul had left the most beautiful stick of all for me—a stranger—to reuse. It was a staff of white birch, perfectly straight, seven feet tall, strong and pliant, and light to the touch. Someone had even gone to the trouble of carving pretty little designs into its pale white bark, and a few now-faded words of French poetry. I took the stick that some stranger had left for me...and I had no intention of giving it up. I really liked it. And so, I made a genuine effort to help these elderly visitors; I scanned the forest floor for some nice sticks they could use to keep their balance over the rocks. Finding none, I wished them luck and continued down the bumpy path.

True, I was young, and perhaps a little self-centered, and you have to forgive yourself for past failings. But that's really what it was: a failure. Looking back on that encounter today, I know that it was a test. I don't believe that God purposely tested me, that the elderly Welsh couple were angels in disguise, sent to try my spirit. And yet, it was an occasion when my generosity was put to the test, and found wanting. A stick! A stick that someone else had freely left for me to use! I could have used the little saw blade on my handy pocket knife to cut the stick in half; it was more than long enough to provide a decent cane for both of them. It was merely a stick, and it could have saved them from falling on the rocks. It was a thing, a mere thing, but I liked so much I chose not to share it with someone who needed it far more than I did. The kicker of it all is that I still have that stick. It sits with all the others in a corner of my garage. I still like it, but I never use it. It's too tall. It makes me feel like Gandalf the Wizard.

Besides, that stick in all its beauty represents a special sort of shame to me. It represents a day when I benefited from the kindness of a stranger but then failed to share that same kindness. It represents a day when I put my own momentary desires above the well-being of another. I look at that stick now, and it serves as a reminder to me that a stranger, someone kinder than I was, surely came along and helped those poor people down off the mountain.

Oh, the tyranny of things! Things get into our heads and hearts! They cloud our vision and corrupt our values. Things we gather, things we collect, things we acquire along the way, things we cling to or neglect. Things we spend lifetimes working to pay off, and they end up in landfills and junkyards, rusting in the rain. The Apostle Paul says, "For Christ's sake, I have suffered the loss of all things—everything—and I regard it all as rubbish." Indeed, he's happier now without all the things than he'd been before. There is a counterintuitive truth about *things*: The more things we have, the more fear we have, for we sense that we will someday lose them. But if we hold our things lightly, if we can give them up easily, then fear is replaced by an unexpected freedom. There are whole new levels to living; there are realms of joy; there is healing, and wonder, and a better kind of life that we will never know until we take a leap of faith, and loosen our grip on all these things.

How many more things do you need until you're finally happy? Well, you'll rest easier when the bathroom is remodeled, when you get a roomier car, just a few more things, not many. Personally, I'd love nothing more than to have a nice sycamore tree out in our side field, so graceful and majestic. I'd spend summer days in its deep shade, listening to the breeze moving through its big leaves. But if I plant one today, it won't be the size I want until I'm in a wheelchair. Better, then, to take what it would cost to plant a sycamore and give that money away to someone who needs it or some worthy cause. Perhaps the question is not, "What do I need to gain in order to be happy?" Perhaps the question is, "What do I need to give up in order to be happy?" You've heard it all your life, and it's still true: You can only keep what you can give; you can only have what you can share.

Today is World Communion Sunday, and one thing I need to give up is an extra ten minutes from this worship service for the Capital Campaign Celebration that follows. And yet, our table stretches all the way round an impoverished world today. And as we join the unseen others at this table, I invite you to meditate on all the things in your life, not in a guilty way, but in a grateful way. What do you need for daily bread? What can you spare? By the time you put the cup to your lips, I would encourage you to name a thing or two in your own life that you can give up so that those others might have enough. "For Christ's sake, I have suffered the loss of all things—all things—and I regard it all as rubbish." Amen.