

These days are so hard. I think we are all exhausted by the amount of information in our inboxes, the amount of chaos in our government, the conflict and the suffering all around us. We seek words of comfort and courage, from our friends, family, holy scriptures, from our God and Christ.

As followers of Jesus, we focus primarily on His ways and words, yet also on the ways and words of his followers, like the apostle Paul. In this morning's reading (Phil 3:4-14), the words that really stand out to me are when Paul speaks of "the surpassing value" of knowing Christ. (We recall that Paul met Christ in his risen form as a flash of lightning and a voice, on the road to Damascus; his relationship with Jesus was therefore in a spiritual sense, he was sensing the risen Christ, the Spirit of Christ.) This is the same avenue we all have for knowing Jesus, as the Christ, as Presence and Spirit, even as what Richard Rohr calls "Universal Christ," who can be present anywhere, among ALL people, and within Nature itself.

Paul's testimony of a "surpassing value of knowing Christ" could also be expressed as a greatest or supreme value. To Paul, nothing else in this world could be greater than Christ, so to give supremacy to anything else is a form of addiction, arrogance, even idolatry. No people or tribe can be supreme in this world! Paul realizes that although he has all qualifications of a religious leader, a Pharisee, that in no way can he boast about anything, except as he says, to "boast about his weaknesses," so that it will be obvious he relies on God. Remember Moses came to God in humility, even weakness, telling God that he could not lead the people because he was a stutterer. God then pointed out that his brother Aaron could help him speak, and soon humble Moses becomes a great leader.

Paul comes to the realization and testimony that other things we value can only pale in comparison to knowing Christ. (Paul says they even seem like "rubbish" to him, compared to the value of knowing Christ.) If knowing Christ is first and foremost in our lives, we

are living what can be called a “Christ-centered life.” With Paul we can say that other things and priorities are insignificant compared with the value of knowing and living in Christ’s Spirit. I am strong believer in the universality and inclusivity of Christ, His presence, at least as divine spark and potential, in all people. Yet I also realize how important it is to study his “particularity,” as Jesus of Nazareth, for in particular teachings and stories, we find universal truths.

So what in particular is so great about Christ? What is so divine, so supreme, of such “surpassing value?” Too many things to mention(!), but here are some of the most memorable or obvious: He starts his ministry by saying he has come for the blind, the oppressed, the poor, the captives (Others said that too; it’s a universal loving mission). He said blessed are the peacemakers (Others urged peacemaking also, a noble value). His parables taught wonderful lessons: just recently we heard his parable about Generosity (a full day’s wage to the workers who were not hired until late in the day.) He taught about the importance of humility, coming like a child to the kingdom of God (Isaiah also envisioned that one day a “little child shall lead!”) Jesus spoke often about Forgiveness. This is another divine and universal value, yet Jesus went even further in telling Peter 7 times 70, a forgiveness without limit. Jesus spoke often about loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Others also taught and preached this value, but Jesus went even deeper in saying Love your enemy too, and pray for your enemy. Then Jesus embodied such forgiving love, showing his divine self, by forgiving even on the cross, saying, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” And Jesus is so great because he talks about the “Light” that is in each of us, a universal truth. He says YOU are the light of the world, so let YOUR light shine. The Quakers are always talking about the Divine Light being in all people, and that we access this light in quiet, in silence, and we know that practiced what he preached, said to have often gone off to a quiet place, to be alone for prayer.

Jesus is also so great because he was a master of parables and stories, symbols and metaphors, analogies and allegories. (And he never had my middle school English teacher!) Perhaps the most famous are: the Parable of the Sower of seeds, the Parable of the prodigal son, parable of the Good Samaritan, and on and on. In the realm of symbol, Jesus said: I am the bread of life, I am the vine, I am the good shepherd, I am the living water, I am the door for the sheep. Was he literally a shepherd? a door? a vine? water? Of course not, but those images can be symbols with real power to change our lives. Speaking of which, that is one of the supreme things about Jesus, is his ability to change lives and change hearts. Those who were his close disciples became fearless, selfless and focused with mission for peace and justice and loving kindness.

One more example: He is so great and supreme because of his adherence to Truth... He has supremacy in this world because he is the incarnation of Truth, (telling his disciples he IS the Way and the Truth). We say over and over again that in these times we especially need trusted leaders who will be honest, who will speak truth. One of the most important or deepest truths is being honest about our sins and shortcomings, or the pain and suffering in our lives. I heard a talk recently by a spiritual teacher by the name of Paula D'Arcy, (who does retreats with Ken Medema, and was part of his recent concert). She made the point that so often in our lives we need the opportunity to be truly honest with at least one other person. Yes, a good therapist, spiritual advisor, even a good friend, can fit the bill. One of Paula's favorite illustrations, use of metaphor (or is it simile??!) is that the painful wounds in our lives are like beach balls. When you try to push them and hold them under water, they just keeps coming back up! It is a memorable way of illustrating that wounds must be addressed, sorrows must be grieved, or they will just keep popping up until we do deal with them.

Being honest about our limits and sorrows makes our lives more open to compassion, to gentleness and understanding, for ourselves and for others. The alternative is to be “puffed up” with pride, machismo, invincibility, which is building a house on sinking sand, masking our true selves. Being honest with another about our true selves is building our house on a rock, the solid rock of Truth, the solid rock of Christ. I’d like to close with a song by Mike Mirabella, with a Down syndrome daughter, that speaks to all of us, since I assume that we all know the limits and special needs in ourselves and in our own families. The father’s honest vulnerability and love is truly the Way of Christ. Here’s a song of “surpassing value!”

1. My sister is a butterfly, who never learned to fly. Her secret world is hidden, in the silence of her eyes. She often seems quite distant, and I wonder if she knows how much I truly love her how I feel her in my soul.

*Walk with me, I'll teach you. Talk to me, I'll reach you. Don't turn away or be frightened to say: hey, I need you, you're beautiful, I love you!*

2. You can look among the flowers, but I doubt if she'll be found; she'll be sitting in a corner, or be flattering on the ground. She isn't polished in her ways, or graceful like a dancer; but she can ask you questions, for which there are no easy answers.

*Walk with me, I'll teach you. Talk to me, I'll reach you. Don't turn away or be frightened to say: hey, I need you, you're beautiful, I love you!*

3. She’s a very special butterfly, an angel in disguise. Not everyone will look for her, and few will even try. But if you find her, please be gentle when you hold her in your hand. Speak to her with a loving heart, I know she'll understand.

*Walk with me, I'll teach you. Talk to me, I'll reach you. Don't turn away or be frightened to say: hey, I need you, you're beautiful, I love you!*