

Philippians 3:17-4:1

17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. ¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

23 One Sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?' ²⁵And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' ²⁷Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.'

³ ¹Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' ⁴Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

RUTS

I'm sure you've all heard about the remarks made between Pope Francis and Donald Trump, and you might be wondering where I stand on this whole issue, and maybe you don't, but I figure I'd tell you anyway, because today's message is about ruts. I know a lot of people who are stuck in ruts. Many people think our government is stuck in a rut. I think the words spoken by Donald Trump and Pope Francis serve to demonstrate that Christianity is in a rut as so many people claiming to be Christian can hold such opinions and beliefs that are so, well, unChristian. And so I will use our scripture passages present examples of common ruts we as Christians may fall into, and hopefully offer some good counsel on getting unstuck and avoiding future ruts.

Ruts are furrows in a road, usually a dirt road, that are made by repeated use of the road. I remember one of my chores as a boy was to take gravel or something to fill in the ruts on our quarter mile driveway at our home in Center Cross, Virginia. Obviously it was a dirt driveway, and it wasn't level, so when it rained water would cut channels in the driveway and giant puddles, and cars going through puddles would splash the mud and make the puddle bigger, and between the channels formed by runoff and the puddles that grew into lakes, you'd have a very messy driveway. And if you hit a rut as you were going up a hill, gravity could prevent you moving forward, and behold, you would be stuck in a rut. And one of the most comical things that I've ever seen is someone in a nice car that is stuck in a rut, spinning

its wheels with the false expectation that they will actually get out of that rut. They won't, at least not until the water in the puddle evaporates. The only way out of that rut is to either get some other vehicle with better traction to push or pull you out, or, if you don't have another vehicle to help you, to get your fellow passengers to push you, or to go find a shovel, some planks or whatever. The point is that there is effort involved in getting yourself out of that rut.

We can get stuck in mental ruts as well. Think of the driveway as the path you travel regularly with Jesus Christ; that path can easily get run down if we don't maintain it, and we don't always do such a good job with this. We claim to be walking the path with Jesus, but we've stopped maintaining the road we walk on. We may claim faith, but the road is getting ruttier and ruttier day after day until one day we find ourselves stuck, spinning our wheels. Why? Because we neglected to maintain the road.

Ruts don't just appear out of nowhere; they take time to form, and if we don't take care of them when they're small they will grow to the point where they trap us. We neglect God and though we profess faith it's a stagnant faith. We are no longer walking the road with Jesus; instead we are in our car, and perhaps we're quite comfortable in that car, and we've left Jesus somewhere along the road. Instead of putting our trust in him, we've found something else, like ourselves, to put our faith in, even though we have been told through scripture and through experience, even through reason, to put our trust in God – it even says so on our coins. But we prefer to trust in other things...like our cars, our money, our health, our charisma, and we think those things will get us through those ruts. But eventually you break down. Eventually you need to get a tow.

Our Gospel reading from today illustrates one of those ruts that I referred to last week as legalism – the notion that the way to please God comes through obeying a set of laws. Saul, before he was Paul, was a legalist, a Pharisee specializing in the Law, and the reason he persecuted followers of Jesus was because they were a big threat to the status quo. These Christians were trying to lead a faith out of a rut, but too many people were too comfortable in that rut. Saul was destined to have a good career as a Pharisee, and these Christians were threatening his future and the future of the entire faith. Jesus was precisely that kind of threat. The law was the glue that held their society together; if everyone could agree upon it and abide by it, life could be good. But here is Jesus boldly breaking one of the Ten Commandments (in their eyes). What would life be like if everyone disobeyed the Law? The community would fall apart; you'd have chaos because the whole community was founded on the Law. And so you enforce a Law even when it interferes with the healing of a man with a withered arm. This is why Jesus gets angry; people had turned the Law into their God, because they considered it more important than the life individuals, particularly individuals with disabilities. What kind of a god would set those kind of priorities? It seemed that most people had stopped asking those questions and instead trusted their religious leaders who told them that this was exactly what God wanted – for us to obey the rules. And the wheels just kept spinning.

We can't blame the Law for the rut that the Pharisees were in; there's nothing wrong with the Law. The problem is that people mis-prioritize; what Jesus says of the Sabbath is true about the whole Law. The Sabbath was made for us; we weren't made for the Sabbath. The Law too was made *for* us, not us for the Law. God did us the favor of giving us rules to keep a very sinful humanity in check; the Law kept people from killing one another on a grand scale, but God doesn't just want us to survive with one another; he wants us to love one another, and the Law couldn't take us that far. Jesus was imposing a new Law that would lead all of humanity out of the rut of legalism and down the road of salvation led by the Holy Spirit, which would carry us beyond the structure that the Law imposed. Salvation would be for all humanity, not just the Jews. The wall that the Law erected would come down as this Law of Love and the guidance of the Holy Spirit worked to build bridges.

It brings me to the little spat between a presidential candidate and the pope. First the Pope did not come out and say that Donald Trump was not a Christian; he said, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian.” And I am in full agreement with Pope Francis on this matter. We may disagree on how those bridges should be built, but we are in the business of bridge-building, not wall-building.

And I’m glad the Pope did not specify Donald Trump for two reasons. First because there are plenty of people who call themselves Christians and even speak on behalf of the entire Church who say things and do things that are contrary to what the Bible teaches us. Second, because one of our worst habits is to scapegoat a person, pointing out the speck in his eye and ignoring the log in our own. That’s how ruts form; ignoring the erosion and the puddles and the ruts on our own driveway until one day we get stuck.

Getting stuck in a rut is no big deal, really, because Christ can always get you out of it. The worst tragedy is not knowing that you’re even in a rut, and here I mourn the fact that the Church in America is very much in a rut, generally speaking, precisely because we have taken our eyes off of Christ too often and placed our trust in other things. We have a ton of folks who use the Bible to defend their policies; sadly the Bible has been used to defend all sorts of immoral and unjust behavior. We have folks who consider themselves Christian by affiliation, because they belong to a church, but don’t bother to pray or repent or care much at all about their relationship with God or with other people. We have faith misleaders who will tell people what they want to hear in order to make a profit, and as upsetting as all this can be, the most upsetting truth is that *these people don’t see their own folly. They don’t see the rut that they are in.*

So how do you do that? How do you gain some clear vision of the dangers and so avoid them? Simple answer: don’t take your eyes off of Jesus. The way you do that is by walking with him, and the way you do that is by something John Wesley called “the means of grace,” which are:

1. Works of piety.
2. Works of mercy.

Works of piety include prayer, studying scripture, fasting, worship, and regular fellowship.

Works of mercy include caring for the least among us and promoting justice throughout the world.

Don’t misunderstand me; these are not ways of getting God’s approval. These are ways that enable us to keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, because in living a life that revolves around works of piety and works of mercy is walking the with Jesus, who spent his life engaged in acts of piety and acts of mercy. Works of piety and works of mercy keep us aware of the condition of the driveway because they compel us to keep our eyes on it. And with our eyes on it, we can start attending to the furrows and the puddles and those things that might cause us to get stuck. Works of piety and works of mercy help us to stand humbly in God’s presence and place more and more trust, more and more faith in him.

And when we grow in Christian character, we may reach the day when we can say, as Paul does in our Epistle lesson, “Imitate me!” That’s a brash thing to say, isn’t it? The thing is, Paul is not saying it out of pride, because Paul has already confessed that he has been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer his own life that he lives. And Paul knows that he can only continue to make such a bold statement as long as he’s maintaining the driveway, practicing those means of grace, keeping the driveway in good condition so that he doesn’t end up eating his words.

Can you identify any ruts in your driveway? Are you stuck in some way, or do you see warning signs of getting stuck in the future? This is the season of Lent, a time of self-examination, of getting help to get unstuck if we are stuck, and a season of driveway maintenance, of repair work that will keep us from getting stuck in the future.

And we are the church, the place where we should trust one another to help another with whatever ruts we happen to have. As we move through this season, let us pray that God would give us clear vision that we might see the hazards on the driveway and so work to remove them, that our walk with Jesus would be constant, smooth, and uninterrupted. Amen.