

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor  
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, November 15, 2020**  
**24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 33/Proper 28/Year A**  
**2021 Annual Stewardship Campaign – “Faithful Amid the Fray” – Week 3**  
**First Reading: Philippians 3:2-16**  
**Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:14-30**  
**Sermon Title: “Pressing Toward the Goal”**

## **Theme**

*Zion has been hosting Red Cross Blood Drawings for a few years now, with the organizational support of Dr. Keith and Karen Kuppler. Providing space is only one small part of the ministry, but an essential part. During the pandemic isolation, many sites such as churches, libraries, and civic clubs shut down and canceled their drawings. Zion never did, and faced with a blood shortage emergency, when the Red Cross asked if we could take on additional drawings to cover some of the canceled sites, we said, "Yes, You belong here. We belong together." People showed up to donate including many of our members. "Faithful Amid the Fray"? You decide.*

## **Text**

### **Philippians 3:2-16**

<sup>2</sup>Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!

<sup>3</sup>For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh — <sup>4</sup>even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup>Beloved, I do not consider

that I have made it my own but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. <sup>16</sup>Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

### **Matthew 25:14-30**

<sup>14</sup>For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>22</sup>And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' <sup>23</sup>His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>24</sup>Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' <sup>26</sup>But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?' <sup>27</sup>Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup>So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

## **Sermon**

Today I am continuing the four-week 2021 Annual Stewardship Campaign that I have entitled, "Faithful Amid the Fray." That title occurred to me months ago when I observed or, as in the case of today's featured members, heard about ministry being done despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Each week of this series there will be a sermon starter video featuring people from our fellowship, whom you probably know, who, in my opinion, did and continue to do ordinary ministry in this extraordinary time. And that makes them, "Faithful Amid the Fray."

## **Video**

I confess the reason we have a Red Cross Blood Drawing here at Zion is that I have been after us to have one for years. In 1997, when I was first ordained and became pastor of the little church up north, that church was part of a ministerial of several churches that worked beautifully together. One of the several ministries that the ministerial did was provide a Red Cross Blood Drawing every 56 days. It was always held at the local Catholic church, but all the member churches took a turn at hosting it. I don't recall all these years later, whether the first one I registered for was one that the church I served hosted, or if I just decided to donate to support the ministerial.

Having never donated before, I went in with my eyes wide open.  
First mistake, don't look around.

It was my turn and they laid me on the cot and began telling me everything they were doing.  
Second mistake, don't listen to the details!

Finally, it came time for the donation to begin. I did not enjoy the poke, but it wasn't terrible. But pumping the blood got into my head and I began to sweat and squirm. The phlebotomist noticed and asked me if I was okay – what do you think I said? "Sure, fine. Is it hot in here?"

She yelled for another phlebotomist to come over and they lowered my head, raised my feet, and put a cold pack on my head.

She asked if I wanted to continue - what do you think I said? "Sure, fine!" Those were the last words I remember saying before waking up to people slapping my face and repeating my name.

I'd like to think I finished that donation but I really don't know, because, with one of the workers on one arm and another on the other, they took me to the canteen and made me sit there for quite a while. For years after that, whenever I showed up to donate, the phlebotomist would greet me and say, "Oh you're the one. Head down, feet up. Get me a cold pack." But that didn't stop me. Giving blood is something almost everyone can do. It does so much good and it costs nothing but maybe an hour of time. I rarely miss our every 60-day drawings. Over the years I have donated 67 units or a little less than 8-1/2 gallons. But enough about me.

Dr. Keith Kuppler retired and if anyone appreciated the Red Cross blood supply a doctor would, so I asked him if he and Karen would take on being the host and organizer and he agreed. Though Karen refused to be on the video, I think we can all agree, it would have been prettier with her in it. The Kupplers work with the Red Cross and make phone calls to fill up the schedule because the team is on-site whether we meet our objective or not, so why not meet it. You would have to ask them, but I believe after the first or second drawing, we have always filled our schedule. Good life-saving work is done out of this church.

I'm not really sure why blood was in short supply during that March/April/May time period. It might have been because of increased use of blood in treating COVID-19 patients, or it might have been because donations were down due to so many collection sites closing, but the Red Cross called the Kupplers asking if we were going to host our drawing or not. The Kupplers called me, and I asked the Council and together we said, yes! And we never have missed a scheduled drawing. Then, with all the other sites like libraries and churches and so forth closing down, the Red Cross called the Kupplers and asked if we could take on another drawing or two. The Kupplers asked me and I asked the Council and we said, yes!

So while other churches and public facilities closed down for fear of the virus, we said, together with the Red Cross, we're smart enough to do this ministry safely and we have. Put another way, we are not carelessly fearless nor stupid. We are smart and cautious but given that, we boldly go forward.

In the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus told a parable, and the conclusion of that parable is a great stewardship message. Jesus said:

<sup>29</sup>For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

Jim Clark and Steve Satterfield had the blood and were willing to share it to save lives. That makes them good stewards of what God has first given them. And that they shared it during a pandemic makes them, "Faithful Amid the Fray."

Back in the ancient of days, with their primitive understanding of biology, they understood that blood *was* life, and that made sense to them because when they observed a person with a major wound bleeding out, they concluded that their life was draining out of them, and that blood contained the essence of the person. And in the sacrificial system, it is the lifeblood of the victim that is the source of the atonement. Blood was the most important and powerful element of life and that is why there were so many laws, rules, and commands concerning blood and the handling of blood. I think some of that carries over into our society even today. Many of us are completely weirded out and even fearful about blood.

Turning our attention to the reading from Philippians, the Apostle Paul pointed out that all the law, rule, and commandment keeping that he had done as a Pharisee he now regarded "as loss because of Christ." Actually, the translators of the NRSV have cleaned up Paul's rather profane language. The word that is translated as "loss" is actually the more profane form of our word poop. Yep, Paul said a potty word.

One time back in my manufacturing days, my boss and I got into labor negotiations with the union. I thought everything was going fine when my boss raised his voice, pounded the table, and cussed a blue streak, and then turned to me and said, "Come on Jesse, these blanket-blanks aren't serious about negotiations." And we walked out. We got outside the conference room and winked at me and said, "We'll see what happens next." It was all for show.

Months later, having learned from my boss, the union leadership came into my office with a grievance for something and I tried the same thing. I pounded the

table and cussed 'em out, and told 'em to get back to work, and as they left my office, for good measure I slammed the door and picked up a chair and threw it against the wall – you know, just for show. I saw those guys' heads turn around to see where the sound had come from. About then, a picture I had hanging on the wall fell and broke into pieces. *Poop!*

The point is, though I don't think this way anymore, sometimes we use colorful language to emphasize a point. In Paul's illustration, all that law, rule, and commandment keeping that he had done as a Pharisee he now regarded as ... *poop!*

But that wasn't his point either. His point was that he had concluded that there was nothing he could do to earn his own righteousness. Once he had met Jesus Christ, whose followers he had persecuted, he wrote:

<sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss (*poop*) because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish (*poop*), in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

Later in the First Reading Paul wrote and I paraphrase, "I have emptied myself of everything, and find myself writing you from jail - even my freedom has been taken from me - but now, because I only exist in Christ, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Odd, don't you think, that during a stewardship sermon series I refer to this guy who convincingly wrote that nothing will change your status with the LORD, and here I would include giving generously. Well, it is what it is.

Years ago I wrote an email to Bishop Marcus Miller telling him that I thought Martin Luther really messed things up. Before the Reformation, the Church had the power to extort whatever it could get out of people. They never had stewardship campaigns! Now that there is no "church tax," we clergy are left having to convince and even beg the membership to give out of what they think is their own money. He saw the humor in that.

But it is a fact, you can be the widow with the mite and give all you have, or be the rich man who contributes gobs of money when that is a relatively insignificant offering from him. The real goal that we ought to be pressing toward is faithfulness. And when our goal is faithfulness, all of our life's priorities fall into their proper places. But I am familiar of the draw of the world. It takes real spiritual maturity to see most material worth is just *poop!* Never the less, the world and its *poop*, will put up quite a fight for your faithfulness.

Now a letter went out this week with a commitment card included. We would like you to prayerfully consider your level of commitment next year and fill out the card and get it back to us as soon as possible.

Yes, we find ourselves living in an extraordinary time. None of us knows what tomorrow brings, but honestly couldn't we say that about any day of our lives? I ask you to ponder what the cost of your righteousness is worth – that which you did not earn, has already been paid for. All I ask for is your faithfulness. For my closing prayer today, I think the Prayer of the Day will do nicely.

### **Prayer**

Righteous God, our merciful master, you own the earth and all its peoples, and you give us all that we have. Inspire us to serve you with justice and wisdom, and prepare us for the joy of the day of your coming, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen