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Cutting Our Losses

Philippians 3:7

In Paul's letter to the Philippians he writes about cutting his losses. He was not thinking of baseball or the kind of catastrophe that occurred on Wall Street last week in which investors lost more than a trillion dollars in a single day. No, Paul was thinking of a reality that is even more profound than that.

As a young man Paul's life was well grounded within the highly developed religious system of Judaism. In that system he held a privileged position. He had been educated at the best schools. He knew the right people. He was a rising star in this religious establishment and was well on his way to a very promising career. But all that changed after he was blinded on the road to Damascus. With the restoration of his sight, Paul finds himself on a very different path. This is not a path to career advancement or a leadership role in a strong religious institution. Self-serving goals are no longer the bottom line for Paul. That is what he means when he writes, "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ (Philippians 3:7)."

Paul has moved onto a path which has a very different bottom line. The priority of his life has become loving God and serving others. The grace of God has reached out to him in Jesus Christ to assure him that he is loved and valued just as he is. He does not need a better job or a bigger bank account or a finer home. God's love has set him free from all that so that now he can give himself in concrete acts of ministry. This ministry can be done anywhere. God's grace has empowered Paul to work with Jews and Gentiles. It has empowered him to work with people who are slaves and people who are free, people who are rich and people who are poor. When Paul writes this letter to the Philippians he is writing from jail. But even the limitations of prison do not prevent him from living by his new bottom line. Prison provides a unique opportunity to love God and serve others.

In the 21st chapter of Matthew we find Jesus challenging religious leaders to take a hard look at the bottom line of their lives. He tells the parable of tenants who refuse to accept the authority of the owner of the vineyard. They are turned out of the vineyard because of their self serving priorities. They are turned out because the bottom line of their lives is accumulating as much as they can. When they start breaking the rules to serve themselves they lose control and they don't know how to stop. In the end they resort to violence. Jesus wants his listeners to embrace a different bottom line as true stewards who love God and serve others. They can do that as they follow his example.

This is the challenge that Paul issues to the Philippian church. He knows that they are struggling with the bottom line of their life and ministry. They are hearing persuasive voices which advise them to fashion their church along the lines of the more successful synagogues in their community. They are told that in order to succeed they must align themselves with people of power and influence. But Paul reminds them that this is not what their faith is all about. Their faith is the product of the grace which Jesus has conveyed to them. This grace is offered freely with no strings attached. The conventional path to success is something they need to lose. Paul tells them that if they keep their eyes on Christ, the bottom line will take care of itself.

Frank Deford recently offered a commentary on National Public Radio about the influence of the actor, Paul Newman, who died last week. He said:

There's an old French expression: 'An actress is more than a woman, and an actor is less than a man.' No one ever thought that of Paul Newman. In a way, men and women alike saw him more as a hero than an actor... Now, I happen to live in Westport, Conn., where he was absolutely beloved, as a citizen, as a neighbor. Oh my, how we've always loved to say that we lived in the same town as Paul Newman. What a cachet that's always been! Of course we're supposed to be sophisticated in Westport, so the rule was you didn't make a fuss when you saw him around. But, of course, everybody kept watching him out of the corner of their eyes... The last time I saw him was a few months ago. There were already rumors that he was dying. He was never so large as he appeared on screen—but now, even as he was still in good humor, he looked positively frail. We were at a small concert and, just by chance, he and his wife, Joanne Woodward, sat right next to me and my wife. When the lights dimmed, I happened to glance over, and I saw that, right away, he'd taken Joanne's hand. They'd only been married 50 years. He kept holding her hand all the way through, just like they were teenagers. I reached over and took my wife's hand. There are not many things any of us could do so well as Paul Newman, but, I thought, if you could follow his lead in any way, then you'd be a fool not to.

Following the example of Paul Newman at the concert enabled Deford to better love his wife. Following the example of Jesus empowered the Apostle Paul to place his life on a different path and joyfully cut his losses. Jesus shows us how to love God and serve others.