

Philippians 3:4b-14

^{4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: scircumcised 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; ^{6a}as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ 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 ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² 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. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

SERMON

At one time in my life I was a carpenter. I loved the work. I loved buying tools. I loved being outdoors. I loved the idea of having such a useful skill. Then, I changed careers and became a teacher, and later, a computer programmer. Each career had its pluses. Teaching gave me a real sense of mission. And computer programming gave me the ability to support my wife, own a house and find the stable home life I had been seeking.

But I missed being a carpenter and so I volunteered for Habitat for Humanity. It seemed like a good thing to do and I thought I would enjoy it. Before long, the staff recognized my skills and had me leading crews in framing floors. On any given Saturday morning I would have a new house that would start out as a bare block

foundation and end the day as a beautiful flat surface; smooth and the color of new wood.

So it was business as usual when I got the call from the volunteer coordinator for Habitat, “Joe, we have another house that will need a floor in about three weeks. All of your crew will be there. Are you able to lead it?” “No problem,” I said. “I’ll see you in three weeks.”

Three weeks later, I load my truck up with the tools I need. I know exactly what to take with me and have rarely been surprised. I drive to the job site and greet the volunteer coordinator. “There’s been a change of plans,” he says. “We won’t be doing framed floors anymore. We will be doing concrete pads.” Well, it was hard to describe the rush of emotions that I had.

First there was the annoyance of having something sprung on me. But then as the reality of this new situation set in, I came to realize that a change had occurred which made all of my skills pretty much useless. I was angry and resentful. I didn’t know anything about making a floor with concrete. I couldn’t lead my crew anymore. I was just another unskilled volunteer. If I was going to be of any use at all, I was going to have to learn something new. Something new.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul explains how he was an excellent Jew; a paragon of zeal in his persecution of the followers of Jesus Christ, and blameless as to his righteousness under the law of Moses. He was someone who had things all figured out. He thought he had all the tools and skills needed to be in perfect relationship with God. He was certain that he could earn his salvation. And then something surprises him on the Damascus road. Paul has a vision which forever changes him. He senses

the presence of Christ. And he experiences an incredible and shattering revelation: Salvation is a gift and cannot be earned.

So Paul must reconcile this new truth that has been shown to him with the life that he has led thus far. And comes to a frightening conclusion. All the things that make him an excellent Jew have come to nothing. They do not bring him any closer to salvation. Christ has already earned it for all of humanity by taking on our sins and sacrificing himself on the cross. It was this truth that must have shook Paul to his core. It is one thing to be proved wrong in a small matter, but to have one's whole life work count as nothing is a true existential crisis. What a shock! Paul's whole life spent being a good Jew, excellent in every respect, counts for nothing?

But if Paul is still wrestling with this scandal that has turned his life around we see nothing of it in his letter to the Philippians. Paul has clearly come out the other side of his crisis. He is now just as zealous for Christ as he was for being a Jew, if not more. He has come to understand that all of his study of the law, all the careful observances, all of his actions to defend the law against the heretical Christians have come to nothing. But instead of lamenting the worthlessness of all his personal achievements, he has found something else into which to plow his incredible energy. He has found something new. He has found faith in Jesus Christ.

For just as he has found out how helpless he is to secure his own salvation, he has discovered that Christ has already paid a dear price so that humanity may have it. Christ has already done what Paul could not do for himself through the law. There is nothing for Paul to do except to take all the works and teachings of Jesus Christ into his heart and say "I believe, I believe them with all my heart."

To say those words and mean them...really mean them has a powerful effect upon us. They are life changing words. Everything we do from that moment forward is informed by those words. But more importantly the implications of those words become clear to us. They are a call to action. We see the life and works of Christ and want to make our own lives like his. We do things we would never consider seriously in our old lives. Why? Because we believe. This is the faith that Paul talks about. This is the purest and most compelling meaning of the word.

And Paul's faith makes him aspire to some pretty lofty goals. Verse 10 says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." Paul recognizes the death of Christ as the culmination of a life of self-sacrifice for the life of others. And the resurrection was God's verdict of Christ's righteousness. This is a powerful image for Paul. If the very Son of God can humble himself and be the servant of humanity, even to the point of suffering insult, pain and death, and these acts result in God's positive judgment then a believer who is faithful can do little else but follow what Christ did.

But even then, as it is clear to Paul that he must follow Christ, he is careful to say that there is no promise that he will earn favor with God and attain resurrection. The next verse says "if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." This is a difficult translation and when I studied it I realized that this needed more embellishment than the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible wants to give. If you will, I would like to paraphrase these two verses this way: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and share in his sufferings, conforming myself to the way he sacrificed

himself, and if I attain resurrection as Christ did, it will be by some other power than my own.”

So now I am thinking, “Where does this leave me?” I am no Jesus. And I don’t think I am called to be a tentmaker pastor like Paul traveling all over with hardly any belongings, always running the risk of being roughed up or jailed by the local authorities. I don’t think I have to ask my wife how she would feel about that. I don’t think many of us feel comfortable with making the sacrifices that Paul made. And some of us have never had that blinding Damascus road experience. Is there no hope for us if we cannot have the same experiences and make the same sacrifices that Paul made?

Well, I think Paul gives us an opening here. For in the last verses of this reading he says that he himself has not reached the “goal.” It is not clear exactly what Paul means by the word “goal.” But from the Greek we can infer that Paul means a spiritual perfection or a perfection in faith. It is a perfection that is far superior to the righteousness he thought he achieved under the law. For it is the perfection achieved by Jesus Christ in his sacrifice on the cross. Paul realized that such perfection was impossible for humanity to attain. For only God in Jesus Christ can take on the sin of humanity and yet be righteous before God. All of us, Paul included, are fellow commiserators, brothers and sisters in our inability to achieve that perfection.

But even though Paul knows that perfection in faith is an impossibility, it does not stop Paul from straining toward it. The implications of such an endeavor are clear. To place your faith in Jesus Christ is not a mere item on a to-do list, or a six-week project, or something like the quest for a college degree. It is a life-long journey. A journey that will have its joys and setbacks. A journey where we will sometimes seem to be

wandering aimlessly. A journey that millions like you and I have begun over the ages but only one has completed. And yet we press on. For faith is what Christ and Paul call us to. It does not matter whether we have a singular event in our lives that causes us to follow Christ - a conversion experience, or a gradual turning of our lives. What truly matters is that we are on the same road, going in the same direction, as the one who blazed a new path for us over 2,000 years ago. The journey of a life of faith is what we are called to. And when our life is spent, and we find ourselves short of the goal, Christ will carry us the rest of the way and will make up for what we lack.

So let us continue you and I. Let us keep our eye on the model of Christ and strive to perfect our faith, forgetting our failures and straining forward towards the goal ahead, confident that Christ in his love and mercy will reach out to us, forgive our failings and carry us to our calling of perfect relationship with God through Christ.