

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 7, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Philippians 3:8-14 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. **10** I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

“Forward Focused Faith”

In Roman mythology, the god Janus has two faces, one facing toward the past and one facing toward the future. He is the one to turn to for transitions and passage of time. But more and more people are telling us that multitasking is a myth. We get so easily distracted. So the experts are telling us to stay in the present. They remind us that the choices we make today will have a big impact on our future.

God wants to give us a different perspective. In faith, he wants us to put aside fear and shame from the past so we can find certainty for the future. He wants us to shed ego and arrogance that build up toxic levels of pride in the present. God has a future in store for you. God wants you to know that your future determines your present.

Joy is a major theme in the book of Philippians. In this small section of the Book of Philippians, in chapter three from verses 18 to 24, Paul points out that we won't find joy in chasing after earthly goals or trying to get things. But neither will we experience joy by wallowing in our defeats and getting sunk by failures. Present joy comes from what you currently have in Jesus. Today's struggles and striving can still be filled with joy when we realize what Jesus has in store for us in the future. God has a way for us to live out our Christian calling with forward focused faith.

Even a quick history of the life of the Apostle Paul would show us a very complex character. But if we back up just a few verses in this chapter of Philippians, we see Paul is battling against some dangerous errors that have invaded the Christian church. Some people have told these new Christians in Philippi that they need Jesus plus circumcision as commanded by Moses. Paul goes to extreme lengths to show that what we have accomplished and our own heritage doesn't matter when it comes to our confidence before God. He lists off all of his spiritual pedigree, his education, his background (Philippians 3:4-6). Then he comes to

this conclusion: **“I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.”** (Philippians 3:8) All that stuff is non-essential. Actually, he says it’s all the stuff that needs to be thrown overboard. Paul goes one step further: **“I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”** (Philippians 3:8,9) Some of the earliest Christians said Paul was talking about table scraps that were thrown to the dogs. A more accurate understanding of “garbage” is the stuff we used to have to worry about before indoor plumbing.

All of those things we accomplish, aren’t sinful or wrong in themselves. But they can be dangerous if we put our confidence in them. Taking pride in garbage makes us miss out on the goal. It would be like taking pride in a patched up Pinto compared to being given a luxury SUV to get you to an award ceremony at the White House. You could patch up your Pinto with duct tape and parts from the junk might allow you to get around town. But if you tried to drive it to Washington, D.C. to receive an award from the President, you’d probably break down somewhere just outside of Moriarity with semis whizzing by at 75 miles an hour. However, if the president sends one of those black SUVs to take you to a private jet and then picks you up in another black SUV, you know you will arrive and get there in style.

This is a challenge for Christians who are proud of our heritage. We are grateful for parents and grandparents who brought us up in the faith. We have worked hard to learn and study the Bible. We overcome obstacles just to get to church. We sacrifice to work for the church and serve other people. None of those things are bad or sinful, but they can be damaging to our life of faith if we grow overconfident in ourselves and our own plans for life. Paul wants us to take the focus off of ourselves, our broke-down patched-up Pinto performance, to see the gifts we have in all of Christ’s accomplishments. Paul tells us why: **“I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”** (Philippians 3:8,9)

There are some other common confidence deflators that prevent us from moving forward in faith. There are some lies that Christians commonly believe. How often have you heard these? Follow your heart. When God closes a door, he opens a window. God never gives you more than you can handle. Now, I think these catchy and memorable cliches are intended to help us. But the problem is they aren’t biblical. And they might actually take us away from true biblical guidance.

If we get too wrapped up in our own plans we can go in the exact opposite direction of pride. We can get overwhelmed by defeat. Typically, it plays out something like this. Tell me if this sounds familiar. We pray to God and do our best to obey. We ask God to help us deal with difficult situations: a failing marriage, dangerous addictions, a person who is being a thorn in the flesh, painful sickness or injury we want to get over. We pray. We turn to Scripture. We do our best to follow God’s will. Nothing. No answer. No results. We conclude God isn’t working. Whatever we’ve been doing isn’t enough to get him moving or motivated or mobilized to answer. So we give up. We try something else. We abandon hope.

We even start to question if it's something we have done. If I'm supposed to follow my heart, then I must be doing something wrong that God isn't making my dreams a reality. If God never gives me more than I can handle, maybe the problem is me. If God is opening a window, then I must just be too foolish that I can't find it.

Tell me how much that default mode of thinking has in common with what Paul says in Philippians 3:10 **"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."** Sounds exactly the opposite, doesn't it? Honestly, these aren't the kind of things I want to know. I'd much rather have God teach me lessons like how to walk with such a heavy crown on my head, how to make important proclamations for the people around me to follow and issue edicts enforced on all the people around me.

But what if God's goals for my life aren't the same as my goals for me? What if God has more in store for us than just giving us everything our hearts are after? What if God has bigger plans for us than taking away all our problems? What if God wants you? What if God wants to take everything that happens in your life and use it to bring you closer to his own heart? **"I want to know Christ."** (Philippians 3:10) What if God wants to teach you who you are, that you belong to him, that he has something amazing in store for you? **"but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."** (Philippians 3:12)

When we toss aside all the garbage that builds up pride in our hearts, when we shed the shame of all our past mistakes, then God shows us everything we have in Christ. And if you have Christ, you have everything.

Here is the source of your confidence before God: **"a righteousness...which is through faith."** (Philippians 3:9) The righteousness that is yours through faith in Jesus gives you everything you could never accomplish on your own. This righteousness that is yours through faith in Jesus gives you the perfect record of Jesus obeying every law without flaw or failure. All the things we think should bring us happiness and joy will fail us eventually. Only Christ and his cross bring us true and lasting joy.

A father noticed his daughter was feeling down. When he asked her what was wrong, she wouldn't talk about how the other girls in middle school made fun of her looks, she just said nothing. So he decided to give her a beautiful bouquet of flowers. The card read: "I think your future husband would want you to have these." The knowledge that someone would appreciate her beauty helped her in the awkward stage of braces and glasses and clothes that never seemed to fit right.

A doctor was consulting with his patient and tried to ease his mind: "Don't worry; after this is all over, you'll be able to run a marathon." "But doctor," the patient replied, "I can't run a marathon now." "Well, you will after you're all done." What kind of confidence would it give you? To know that you will actually be stronger and healthier and more energetic after taking the medication and going through sickening treatments? No father or doctor could guarantee the future. But Jesus can. In Christ, your heavenly destination is guaranteed. And if you have Jesus, you have everything.

When Paul talks about his efforts to “press on,” he is using language from a race or hunt. It’s the dogged determination to do everything to reach the goal. It’s constant striving and unrelenting pursuit. This drive in life is shaped by what Christ gives. This drive toward the goal is freed from fear and doubt over what I’ve done or not done. This drive is strengthened for the struggle by the destiny to which Christ calls us.

I always feel bad for track athletes this time of year. Some days for track meets can be sunny and warm. But those are probably the exceptions. And if you start off the morning with a nice long distance run or a few tries with the shot put, you might wish you had multiple layers to keep you warm. But as you compete, you want to have as few things as possible to get in the way, to restrict your movements, and weigh you down. You need to travel light.

Paul encourages us to put on the uniform of the Christian faith. You can travel light when you ditch your excess baggage of pride or despair and determine to only carry Christ with you. Paul acknowledges that he isn’t there yet. He hasn’t yet been able to stand at the podium to receive the prize. But he is moving forward with determination: **“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”** (Philippians 3:14) But he knows he has been redeemed by Jesus. He wants to know Jesus more and more throughout his daily struggles. And he is filled with joy that the ultimate glory of heaven is in store for him.

What you already have in Christ gives you the confidence to stretch forward toward your heavenly goal. And do it with joy. Amen.