

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
4 October 2026
Philippians 3:4b-14

Since the sermon today has an interreligious theme, let me start with a joke. A priest, a minister, and a rabbi are camping at the edge of a forest. They decide to find out who is best at his job. Each one agrees to go into the forest, find a bear, and try to convert it. At the end of the day they shared how things went. The priest said: "When I found the bear, I read to him from the catechism and sprinkled him with holy water. Next week is his first Communion." The two others were surprised at his success. The minister goes next. "I found a bear by the stream and preached God's Holy Word. The bear was so mesmerized that he let me baptize him." The priest and the rabbi were in awe at the power of the good book. They both looked down at the rabbi, who is lying on a gurney in a body cast. "Looking back," he says, "maybe I shouldn't have started with the circumcision."

I would like to offer you two mental pictures. The first took place on the 14 of June 2013. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, was at an audience with Pope Francis. At the end of the meeting, as it is customary, the Archbishop requested a blessing from the pope, who gladly blessed him. What happened next was remarkable. Pope Francis knelt and asked for the Archbishop's blessing. Archbishop Welby, moved by the humble gesture, proceeded to bless the pope to the anger of some around the globe who saw the pictures.

The second picture took place in May of 2014. While on a visit to the Middle East, Pope Francis included a Jewish Rabbi and a Muslim Imam as part of his delegation. Standing in front of the Western Wall, he was photographed hugging his two friends, Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka and the leader of Argentina's Muslim Community, Omar Abboud. Then, the Pope placed a note in the wall, praying for unity and peace among Christians, Muslims and Jews.

These two mental pictures are important today because of the passage we have from Philippians. Our passage starts with autobiographical data about the Apostle Paul, who mentions his status and achievements within the Jewish tradition. Status refers to the honor the person has within and among the people. This honor could be ascribed to you because of your family and ancestry or it could be acquired through your profession, your social standing, marriage, etc.

Today, Paul gives his resume to the Philippians. He presents them four marks of ascribed or inherited honor: 1. He was "circumcised on the eighth day," 2. He was a member "of the people of Israel," 3. He was "of the tribe of Benjamin",

and 4. he was “a Hebrew born of Hebrews.” For those who cared about ancestry, Paul comes from the right family and has all the marks of greatness. Then Paul presents them 3 marks of something he has done to acquire honor: 1. He was a “Pharisee,” 2. He had been “A persecutor of the church,” and 3. He was “A blameless man who was righteous under the law.” He was well educated, he belonged to the right political and religious group, he followed all the commands of the Jewish Torah, and he was so zealous for the traditions of his people that he those who belonged to “The Way.” By all accounts he had all that it took to become a great teacher and a respected member of the ruling class.

Today, as he sits in jail writing this letter, most likely in Ephesus, as NT Wright has argued in his biography of Paul. He tells the Philippians, “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Paul considers everything he has given up as nothing in comparison to the indescribable joy found in knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord. No great position of power could replace a proper relationship with Jesus. No great honor and distinction could be compared to the liberation found since coming to know Christ.

And here is where we need the two mental images I gave you at the beginning. Many theologians both within Roman Catholicism and within the Reformed churches have argued that Paul in this letter is setting up Christianity as being superior to Judaism. They see Paul as a man who founded a new, better church, based on the teachings of Jesus and who today in this letter is distancing himself from Judaism by saying, “I count all the honor I received in Judaism as garbage, rubbish, dung because Christianity is much better than Judaism.”

This position makes little sense for the following reasons: 1. Paul saw himself as a reformer of Judaism and not as the founder of something new. In fact, Paul had been dead for decades before the followers of Jesus were called Christians for the first time. 2. Paul is not distancing from Judaism, as much as he is presenting Judaism a new way to understand the Law, the sacrificial system, the expectations for Messiah, etc. He is showing Judeans the way to a more inclusive and open Judaism. Messiah has in fact come in the person and ministry of Jesus, and through him the human race has achieved equal standing before God. In Christ, the whole world has received liberation from guilt and shame.

It is because of this liberation from guilt and shame that Paul is willing to suffer the loss of all things: all comforts, all positions of authority, all class benefits, all party perks, and all places of honor. Paul has come to understand after years of ministry that it wasn't by following all the Jewish rules that one becomes

justified or righteous under God. He could never be righteous enough on his own merits to pay the debt. The only way to achieve righteousness and to be free from guilt and shame was “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

To know Christ and to be known by him is more important than any human achievement we may ever get. Now, rather than materialistic ambition, Paul’s only ambition is to make Christ known throughout the world. He had made a decision to do just this, make Christ known, even if this caused him incarceration and great suffering. And Paul found great joy in doing this because he knew the Gospel of Jesus Christ was the only truth worth living and dying for.

We live in a culture that values expertise, knowledge, achievement, and advancement. This is a reality for you as much as it is a reality for me. Resume building is ongoing and if we are to succeed in life we need to think of every move we make as getting us closer to our goals for the future. Today, Paul reminds us of a very basic truth: the only thing that matters is to find and to be found by Jesus of Nazareth. All else we worry about often becomes a distraction and an obstacle.

Rather than believing Christianity to be in a position of superiority and power in relation to other faith traditions, we are called to be the servants of the world, to be healers, to work for peace and equality, and to bless the nations through our ministry and lifestyles. Paul says, “this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Even though being a Christian is difficult, we must forget the past: our wounds and hurts, the ways others have offended us, the ways our lives have not turned out how we wanted them to, our sin and shortcomings. We must forget and we must press on.

But we press on not in hopeless resignation. Not like the stoic or the existentialist who believe this world is all there is. We press on filled with confidence that our current tragedies will never define who we are. We press on filled with joy because we know that God forgives us and loves us. We press on because we know that through Christ the past no longer has control over us. We press on every day to achieve the goal of a proper relationship with God in Christ and with others. And we do this with joy and thanksgiving, knowing that Christ himself will guide us to the Promised Land. With him on our side all is possible.

Let us pray: Dear Lord we thank you that no earthly possession or accomplishment can ever replace a proper relationship with you. Give us the strength to build on what unites us as a human race. We seek a relationship with you and others through the quality of our lives, the inner disposition of our hearts, and our willingness to obey your will. Give us the wisdom to do so. Amen!