

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button

Occasion: 18 Pentecost

Date: October 12, 2014

Theme: "Forward"

Text: Philippians 3: 4b-14

^{NRS} Philippians 3

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised 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; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

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

¹²Not 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. ¹³Beloved, 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, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Beloved in the Lord, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (Philippians 4:23). Amen.

This morning I'm delivering the third in a series of four sermons on St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Now I know that you've been taking copious notes (☺), and of course, the Twitter-verse has been on fire over these sermons, but indulge me a moment while I do a little recap.

In my first sermon I lifted up the spirit of joy that pervades this letter, while also pointing out that Paul's joy has everything to do with his imprisonment at the hands of the Roman Empire. Even "in chains," Paul rejoices, because he believes that he is sharing in the suffering of Christ. He is confident that as Christ was raised to glory from the humiliation of the cross, so Paul will also joyfully participate in Christ's resurrection as a result of his suffering for the gospel.





I almost had a stroke. A large blood vessel began to throb in the middle of my forehead. I wanted to shout at the top of my lungs, “Don’t you kids know that Jesus was the biggest loser in the history of the world? He had everything, even equality with God, and he let it all go to die an utterly despicable death!”

Then it hit me. This is how these kids, and more than likely their parents also, conceive of Jesus. Jesus is the great coach who will equip you with whatever skills and spirit you need so that you can win, no matter what.

But even if you don’t win initially, Jesus will keep you in the game until you are ultimately victorious. Yea, Jesus!

I don’t think there’s anything seriously biblical about that view of Jesus, but it’s a view that fits perfectly with our culture where everything’s about winning and losing. As I sang and played and ate alongside those kids at camp that week, it dawned on me that practically everything in their life is a competition.



School is a competition, band is a competition, sports, of course, is all competition, the arts, dance, virtually every academic endeavor is about competition. And there’s no



competition without winners and losers. Somebody has to go home with the gold, while everybody else just has to go home. That’s a cruel, cold world. Gene Roddenberry came up with Star Trek’s prime directive, Bruce Springsteen came up with ours when he wrote, “Down here it’s just winners and losers and don’t get caught on the wrong side of that line” (*Atlantic City*).

Now people tell me, and I believe them, that this is the world in which we live, and I agree. Maybe we don’t frame everything as an honor/shame proposition, but win/lose is pretty much basic to everything in our world, whether that’s the economy, politics, or high school marching bands. But Paul’s point is that by virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection we are no longer citizens of this world.



We may have to live in this world, endure its cruelties, put up with its absurdities, but as Paul writes in Philippians 3:20, “our commonwealth is in heaven.” We belong to a divine, heavenly order where tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom of God ahead of scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 21:31). We belong to an order where our victory does not demand everybody else’s defeat. We belong to a home, a state, a

kingdom in which our honor, our worth comes by the Savior's absolute defeat, and not by the mean, petty contests whereby we attempt to win our dignity at the expense of others.

Paul is not saying that if we only wait until we die and go to heaven, then everything will be great. Paul is saying that we can live as citizens of our heavenly commonwealth right here and right now. But how? How do we not become as mean and cut-throat as the world in which we live? And what would that look like?



In today's reading from Philippians, Paul offers his own life as an example. Paul begins by saying that if anyone has anything over which to boast, he has more.

He then proceeds to list his bona fides, his honors, or if you will, his wins:

- 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
 - As to zeal, a persecutor of the church
 - As to righteousness under the law, blameless.

That's a totally amazing list of honors and credentials. Paul is saying that within the context of his own people and culture, he was at the top of the heap. Among his own peers, he was without parallel, even claiming that in keeping the Torah's 613 laws, he was blameless. You can't say that Paul didn't have a healthy ego, but then Paul goes on to insist that because of Christ he has come to regard all those gains as loss. In verse 8 he continues by saying, "For his [i.e., Christ's] sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish."



The word translated here as rubbish is the Greek word *skubalon*. Can you say *skubalon*? Now if you consult the Bauer-Arnt-Gingrich-Danker *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* and look up the definition of *skubalon*, you will find (to wit) "refuse, rubbish, leavings, dirt, dung." Paul is saying that because of Christ, all his previous honors, or we'd say wins, are just so much dung, manure, fill-in-the-blank-with-your-own-colorful-synonym for horse, bull, dog or cat leavings. Paul's language is exactly that shocking, crude we might say, because he's saying that once you know Christ, then all the so-called honors and distinctions of this world become just so much waste, dead weight, stuff that stinks up your life.



This is how spiritual maturity happens.

As you live day by day by day in the light of Christ, stuff that you once thought was a very big deal becomes a very little deal, inconsequential, piddling, even. The honors you worked so hard to achieve begin to look kind of silly, and the slights, injuries, mean comments you endured and over which you obsessed now make you wonder why you ever even got upset over things so petty.

In the ninth grade Charles temporarily beat me out of the starting position at left offensive guard.

On defense I was still the starting middle linebacker, but it galled me, incensed me that I wasn't starting on both offense and defense. Now at this point in his life, and maybe even for a while thereafter, starting as guard on our freshman football team was an absolutely stellar moment for Charles Jesclard, but I was going to take that away from him, which I did. Fair and square, I took back that starting guard spot and kept it for the rest of my high school "career."



I look back on that time, and I'm not proud. It makes me want to say, "*Skubalon.*"