

To Know Christ
Philippians 3:4b-14
October 8, 2023

In these last few months I have with you, I want you to know my heart. I told Pastor Craig that the evangelical part of me is coming out. And by evangelical, I mean the part of me that wants you to know Jesus, to follow Christ with your whole heart, to serve Christ wholeheartedly.

I had a friend who heard symphonies in his head. Music he never heard before. Probably no one had ever heard before. The problem: my friend wasn't musical. He couldn't sing. He couldn't read or write music. He had no way to get the music out of his head to share with others. So he said, "I just listen and enjoy the concert."

Often, I have a hard time putting into words what is in my heart about my faith. My heart is full, but I can't get it out. Our scripture passage this morning is from the lectionary for today, and it describes my heart. So hear the words of the Apostle Paul as he describes the fullness in his heart that echo mine.

Philippians 3:4b-14

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ 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^[a] 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.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Apostle Paul wants the people to know his heart. He wants the people to know Jesus, not just know facts about Jesus, but to experience the power and worth of knowing Jesus.

As a young Christian, I was taught how to give a testimony. Tell about your life before Jesus came into it, then what happened when you encountered Christ, then your life after that encounter. So past, present and future.

In a sense Paul is giving his testimony – what his life was like before Jesus, what his life is like now that he knows Jesus, and what it will look like to follow Jesus into the future.

Paul begins by looking at his past – he was the best Jew that he could possibly be. Paul was a complete success as a Pharisee. He followed the law to a tee. He belonged to one of the tribes of Israel. He was as zealous as they come. Even to the point of protecting Judaism from that new sect called Christians, and having them arrested and jailed and killed. His life as a Jew was faultless!

Then came the road to Damascus where he met Jesus in a blinding light...and he was all in.

There's a term in Texas hold 'em poker called "*limping in*." "*Limping in*" is one way to approach a hand. It's conservative. A player is interested enough to bet the minimum and see what cards might turn up but isn't totally committed to playing the hand.

The opposite poker play is a term more of us may be familiar with: "ALL IN!" The player pushes every chip they have into the pot. They hope they have what it takes to go for it all.

Paul is "all in" for Jesus.

How can we love Christ like this? For Paul, he literally had the lights turned off. When he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he became blind viewing the glory of Jesus. Does something have to go dark in you to experience the fullness of light in Jesus Christ?

People in big cities do not see many stars because of what is called light pollution. Take them out of the city to a place where stars are viewed in full, and they are astonished at the beauty and majesty they have missed. One person said, "Every atom in your body is begging to go home" when you see the night sky. Do you need to switch something off in order to see the beauty of Jesus?

Or, perhaps put something on. You see these videos on YouTube. A person is colorblind, and family or friends purchase that person those special glasses. Reactions are varied, but most of them begin to cry. They had no idea color was like this, and when they finally see the color, it is overwhelming. Paul says that Jesus adds color to our lives.

Paul has fallen in love with the beauty of Jesus. Remember when you fell in love? You want to know that person, and you spend hours together talking. Paul wants to know Christ. Paul wants to gain Christ. Paul wants to be found in Christ. Paul wants to become like Christ, even in Christ's sufferings. Paul wants to take hold of Christ just like Jesus took hold of him.

Paul looks forward following Jesus into the future until he attains heaven. What is amazing about this section is that Paul is writing from prison. Paul's physical movements are severely limited. Yet, he is using an athletic, physical, forward-moving metaphor: straining forward to what lies ahead; pressing on toward the goal for the prize. He is not talking about the perseverance toward success, but the perseverance of the soul.

You may be familiar with perseverance proverbs. They are self-help statements of wisdom to help us succeed in personal goals:

When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Quitters never win and winners never quit.

Fall seven times and stand up eight.

Paul says to persevere so you can get closer to Christ. It is not looking back but looking forwards towards Christ. To gain Christ because all else is loss. Take hold of Christ because Christ took hold of us. To know Christ because it is such great worth. To know Christ to attain resurrection in our lives. And yes, straining ahead that we may participate in in Christ's suffering.

Many people do not come to church because they say it is boring. We try our best in worship services, but yes, I admit, sometimes they are boring because we domesticate God. Sometimes we soften God's call. Sometimes we cheapen God's grace. One pastor said we've violated the eleventh commandment: Thou shall not make God boring!

But how can Christianity be boring when you read Paul's words here. Sometimes we get so caught up in maintaining church with buildings and budgets and committees, and do things the right way, that we forget the beauty of its uniqueness. When people come into our doors on a Sunday morning, they want to know if we are "all in" in our praying and singing, sitting and standing, that we have gained something the world cannot give.

Church is a gathering place for those of us who, just like Paul, can't contain the good news of God. Church is where we journey on to spiritual maturity. We hope in God so we can give hope to a weary world.

Our goal is not being a good church; our goal is pursuing God and releasing heaven wherever we are. It is giving others what God has already given us: forgiveness, peace, love, joy, generosity, kindness. We believe Christ transforms lives. Paul went from a terrorist who killed Christians to a man who practiced grace and love and forgiveness to everyone. That's where the power is.

Paul writes as a man in love. Paul cannot stop talking about Jesus. Nothing on earth, not even prison, can distract him from the new and joyful pursuit of calling Christ his own.

How do we attain this?!

I think of the movie *Sister Act* when the nuns begin to sing about their love and devotion to Christ by taking a modern-day love song and singing it to God:

I will follow Him
Follow him wherever he may go
And near him, I always must be
For nothing can keep me away
He is my destiny.

I will follow Him
Ever since He touched my heart I knew
There isn't an ocean too deep
A mountain so high it can keep me away
Away from His love.

You may not be at the same place as Paul. Walking with Jesus is a lifetime pursuit. We are always walking and stumbling, learning and forgetting, but always pressing forward step by step, together in this Body of Christ.

In each of Paul's letters to his churches, he has a prayer. This one is my favorite and I pray it for you. It is from Ephesians: I pray "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to *know* this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." Amen.

Join me by saying the words of our Statement of Faith found in your bulletin. It is a portion of the Nicene Creed about Jesus. Let us stand and say together our faith in this responsive reading.....

Affirmation of Faith

The Nicene Creed

Do you know Jesus?

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten not made, one in being with the Father. Through Him all things were made.

Do you know Jesus?

For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the Virgin Mary and became man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day He rose again, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Do you know Jesus?

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.

Do you know Jesus like this?