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Words of Freedom-Through Faith in Christ

St. Paul UMC, Omaha

Philippians 3:4b-14

This month we are exploring Paul's letter to the Philippians. The characteristic note of Paul's letter is above all that of joy—a remarkable feature, in view of the fact that this letter was written in prison, where Paul is being held under a capital charge. Paul's faith triumphs over adversity and causes him to rejoice, whatever happens.

The letter is written to a Christian community with whom Paul has had a long and happy relationship; though they are not perfect Paul notes that they are nevertheless his joy and his crown.

The founding of the Christian community at Philippi around the year 50 had marked a significant development in Paul's ministry, opening up a new area for missionary work. According to Acts 16, Paul was prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching in Asia where he intended to go. Subsequently, Paul had a dream that instructed him to go to Macedonia, modern day Greece. This was considerably farther west than Paul had so far ventured. His first stop in Macedonia was the city of Philippi.

Last week I noted that Paul urged the Philippians "to seek to care for the interests of other first and foremost." He noted that Christ provides us with the blueprint for living a life filled with love and service that results in fulfillment.

This week we see that Paul starts off this part of his letter to the Philippians with an affirmation. We see it as we read verse 1 of chapter 3, "Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord." As noted earlier, when Paul thinks of the Philippines and their faith in Christ he is filled with joy. Whenever Paul thinks of Christ he is filled with joy. As Paul thinks of the possibilities of the spirit working through disciples of Christ he is filled with joy. "Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord."

The message of Paul to the Philippines in chapter 3 is for the followers of Jesus to not worry or be filled with pride because of past efforts. He asks all followers of Jesus to place past efforts to the side as we focus on the merits of Christ. As an example, Paul contrasts his past accomplishments to having faith in Christ.

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

Second, Paul looks to Christ and sees that his past efforts as fruitless and to be left behind as he places his full faith in Christ.

"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."

Paul had many accomplishments but after his encounter with the resurrected Christ he realizes that his past pursuits pale in comparison to God's love and mercy as expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Let's revisit the encounter Paul had with Christ; it is recorded in the 9th chapter of Acts.

"Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” ¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

First, Paul’s speaks of his own past accomplishments.

Second, Paul looks to Christ, sees his past efforts as fruitless, to be left behind as he places his full faith in Christ.

Third, Paul finds his identity in Christ

Acts 3:9, “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.”

Although Paul experienced the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus he indicates that his growth in Christ is ongoing process. Although he understands that eternal life is a gift from God he indicates the Christian life continually works towards that prize.

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.

In verse 12 Paul once again contrasts his former perspective in life and he notes that in Christ he will move press forward with hope and anticipation. 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.

Finally, Paul again emphasizes that he has not yet reached his goal.

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.

I found the essence of Paul’s phrase “The heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” in the words written by Melissa McMahon that I read during her memorial service this past Tuesday. Melissa was a young mother who died of ALS. She and her husband joined the membership of St. Paul this past year. Their little boy Miles is one of the toddlers in our Child Development Center. Melissa words capture that “heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Melissa wrote “When my Dad died from ALS, and I was 10 at the time, I clung to my faith. I feel that in my teens and 20’s I tried to keep a foot in both the world and a foot in with God. I look back at my younger self

trying to serve two masters, which just never worked very well. I always felt empty or lost if I ignored God too long.

In the last few years, including while I've had ALS, I see how important and peaceful it is to fully pursue a life for God. I've let the things of this world fade away and I have a full trust in Him. I've felt blessed beyond all we need in dealing with this disease. God has been at work, protecting my whole family. Providing us with what we need.”

With Paul, with the Philippians, with Melissa we too are invited to press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.