

Pressing On
Philippians 3:4b–14
Sunday, October 8, 2023

Let us pray: Living God, by your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds, that as your Word is proclaimed, we may be led into your truth and taught your will, for the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I want to start off with a question for you, and I want you to answer with a show of hands. How many of you know the names of your great-grandparents? *Wait for a show of hands. Ask some of them what their names were. Can you tell me anything about them? If there are hands raised, then ask, “How many of you know the names of your great-great-grandparents?”*

I was reading something the other week where the author said, “A lot of us can remember our grandparents’ names. *Some* of us can remember our great-grandparents’ names. *Hardly anyone* can remember our great-great-grandparents’ names. We are two or three generations away from being forgotten, so make a difference.”

That got me thinking, because I *didn’t* know the names of my great-grandparents and certainly not my great-great-grandparents. I was so close to my grandparents, they meant so much to me, and I know next to nothing about the families that they came from. So I went to Ancestry.com and started doing some work. I put in my name, my parents’ names, and my grandparents’ names. Then a little thing popped up that said, “Hey, we think these are your grandparents’ parents!” I looked at them and said, “Oh yeah, I *do* remember hearing those names!” (For the record, on my father’s side, William Lee Marshall was married to Berdie Brittain, and Eugene Compton was married to Ida McKinney. On my mother’s side, Jesse Elmo Mahan was married to Lela Catherine Belt, and Odell Elwood Kirk was married to Beulah Irva Brown.)

Then a little thing came up that said, “We think these are *their* parents!” I looked at them and said, “Okay, the birth and marriage records verify it, and these are family names that I’ve heard before, so these are my great-great-grandparents.” That was 16 names, so I’ll spare you the confusion. Then it came up and said, “We think these are *their* parents!” I looked at it and thought, “Well, the dates and places match up, but these are some family names that I have *never* heard before, so I’ll take your word for it, and I’ll trust that the people who did the work before me knew what they were doing. These must be my great-great-great grandparents.” Then it said, “We think these are *their* parents,” and I’m like, “Okay, if you say so....”

It kept going and going and going. I found the first Marshall to come to America (Reuben Marshall, sometime in the 1780s). The first Marshall to be *born* in America (James Douglas Marshall in 1786). His son, George Douglas Marshall (my great-great-great grandfather) fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, while George’s brother William Logan Marshall fought for the Union (literally brother against brother), left for Colorado, and never came back. I learned so much about my family that I had never known before.

Now, on the one hand, what does it matter? What does Susannah Weaver, my great-great-great-great grandmother, who was born in 1790 have to do with me today? But on the other hand, some part of her DNA is in me, making me the person that I am today. Shakespeare said, “What’s past is prologue”; the past sets the stage for the present. And William Faulkner wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” There is some part of the past that we all carry with us, because it has made us who we are today. But it doesn’t have to determine who we are *going* to be.

This is what Paul is getting at in our reading from chapter 3 of his letter to the Christians in Philippi. Paul is working through the family tree here. He is warning them about this group of people who are preaching that circumcision is *necessary* to become a Christian. This had been a big argument in the early church, but it had been settled years earlier (circumcision was *not* required to become a Christian). But these people are telling the Philippians it *is*, and so Paul says, “We don’t place our confidence in the *flesh*. We place our confidence in *Christ*. If anyone has a reason to be confident in the flesh, it’s *me!* I was circumcised on the eighth day, in accordance with Jewish law. I am a member of the people of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin.”

Benjamin was the youngest son of Jacob, and if we look back in the book of Genesis, we see that the sons of Benjamin were Bela, Becher, Ashbel, Gera, Ehi, Rosh, Muppim, Huppim, Naaman, and Ard, and you can keep tracing that family line down to King Saul, the first king of Israel, who was from the tribe of Benjamin. So Paul is descended from him. And the temple in Jerusalem, the holiest site in Israel, where God was said to dwell, was built on land that belonged to the tribe of Benjamin.

Paul is saying, “I didn’t just *become* Jewish. I *am* Jewish. To my very core. A Hebrew born of Hebrews, a Pharisee who kept God’s law to a *t*, and a persecutor of the church.” He neglects to mention that he is also a Roman citizen, which in and of itself was a big deal. Suffice it to say, Paul has got a lot going for him. Anyone would be impressed by these credentials. But, he says, whatever gains I had from all of this, whatever it profited me, whatever *benefit* I got from it, I have come to regard as *loss* because of Christ.” He has come to regard it as *rubbish*, he says. Except he doesn’t say *rubbish*. The Greek word is *skubala*. It’s the s-word.

What he's saying here is that his *past* is not what makes him righteous. *Christ* makes him righteous. His past isn't *worthless*. It's actually of tremendous value. It was his role as a Pharisee that led to him persecute the church, which led to him encountering Christ in the first place. So his past is actually *really important*. It has made him who he is and gotten him where he is. But what he's saying is that Christ surpasses everything that is of value to him. Everything else seems insignificant in comparison. All he wants to know is Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection, the power to make life *new*.

It's like a whole new life started for Paul when he encountered Christ (which it *did*; his name literally changed from Saul to Paul). His past got him there, but then he left that behind to move forward with Christ. It's like he says, "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."

So, what does any of this mean for us today? Good for Paul, but how does this matter for *us* as individuals and as a church? Well, as individuals, we all have a past. Maybe it's a past you're proud of, or maybe it's not. We all have things that we carry with us, good and bad, that shape us and make us who we are. We all have *baggage*. We've all made mistakes. We've all done things or had things done to us that we wish had happened differently.

But your past is not what makes you righteous...or *unrighteous*. It is Jesus Christ who makes you righteous. Whatever *good* things are in your past, Jesus doesn't love you *more* because of that. Whatever *bad* things are in your past, Jesus doesn't love you *less* because of that. There is nothing you have to do to make Jesus love you more, and there is nothing you *can* do – *nothing* you can do – to make Jesus love you *less*. Because *righteousness* isn't about us getting it right. It's about us being in relationship with the one who *did*. Your righteousness comes from the fact

that Jesus Christ gave up his life out of love for you. And all we have to do now is live into that righteousness; live in ways that say, “Thank you, God, for the life that you have made possible!”

And the good news is, when we enter into that new life with Christ, we get to choose what we carry with us and what we let go of. We can choose to let go of the bad and hold on to the good as gifts from God. The mistakes and pain in my life have made me who I am today and gotten me to that point that I’m at. I can look at that and say, “Okay. Thank you, God, for using that.” But I don’t have to keep living in it, dwelling on it. We can choose to carry all the pain and mistakes and anger and fear with us, but it’s a whole lot harder to move forward when you’re carrying all that baggage. So let it go. Easier said than done, right? You may have to let it go over and over again, every day. But it’s about making that choice. I’m going to forget what is behind me and press on to what is ahead of me, because what is ahead of me is Christ, and he is worth more than *all* of that.

Every *church* has a past, too, right? Good *and* bad, blessings *and* pain. All of it has made us the church that we are today. So in that same way, we can choose what we carry with us. We can choose to say, “Thank you, God. Thank you for the *good*, and thank you for *using* the *bad* to get us where we are today.” What we *can’t* do is keep living in it. Keep living in the *good* of the past, wishing that it was that way again. Or keep living in the *bad*, dwelling on the mistakes and pain and problems. The past is what it is and did what it needed to do. The sooner we can let go of it, the sooner we can start moving ahead to be the church that Christ is calling us to be now.

That’s the church that the world *needs*. Not the church from 50 years ago, and not the church before COVID. We can long for it all we want, but it’s never coming back. But if we keep

looking back at it, we're not going to see the *good thing* that's right in front of us. Because what's in front of us is Christ, and he is worth more than *all* of that.

Our past, as individuals and as a church, has made us who we are. But it doesn't have to determine who we're *going* to be. Let's let Jesus do that. Just trust that he wants to lead us to a good place, let go of whatever you need to let go of, and follow him there. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.