

Philippians 3:3b-14

We don't put our confidence in rituals performed on the body, 4 though I have good reason to have this kind of confidence. If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more:

5 I was circumcised on the eighth day.

I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin.

I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee.

6 With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church.

With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless.

7 These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. 8 But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ 9 and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. 10 The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death 11 so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.

12 It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. 13 Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. 14

The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.

John 12:1-8

12 Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. 3 Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, [a] of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. 4 Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, 5 "This perfume was worth a year's wages! [b] Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?" (6 He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

7 Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. 8 You will always have the poor among you, but you won't always have me."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

"It's not that I've already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me just for this purpose...I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me."

And so sums Paul our journeys as Christians, that we look not behind but ahead, that we not remain static in where we've gotten thus far but instead press on toward the future, toward the purpose, for which God grabbed hold of us. That's what we're called to as people of God.

And this might be easy, if only the past weren't so tempting. If only the lies we tell ourselves weren't so attractive, perhaps we'd all already grab hold of the Gospel. Paul's own story tells us why he might hold on to the past. He's got the best of credentials in the Jewish world. He fulfilled the law in every respect of his life. His circumcision happened just on time. His identity and lineage is unquestioned. He even persecuted the early Christians. He did everything he was supposed to do. Paul's got every reason to think that self-righteousness is good enough. And yet, that wasn't the point. What Paul did in the past didn't define him, didn't shape his life. It's what God did in the past, grabbing hold of Paul through the death and resurrection of Jesus, now that was something. That's something worth living for.

As I worked with students from New River Community College and Virginia Tech this week, we worked in a food

distribution center, at a local church, and with a local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. Each of these places seemed to be at this precipice of past and future. For instance, we worked to clean a city lot, abandoned by its owners and then by its home long, long ago and prepare it for a future of abundant life. In the meantime years, it became a trash pit, where countless empty bottles of Corona, broken mirrors, and random electrical and auto parts all coalesced as a sort of sedimentary mystery, with layer upon layer of stuff from squatters, neighbors, and passersby. There was quite a past to this place. Yet, Habitat for Humanity grabbed hold of this piece of land for a purpose: To offer a new family a chance out of poverty and into stability. To get to that purpose, we needed to clear out the trash left behind from the abandoned history, to clean out the remnants of those gods we could no longer trust.

Clearing out this plot felt a lot like pressing on toward the goal, reaching out for the things ahead rather than focusing on the things behind. We heard from a neighbor that the former owner took years to let go of this property. Part of it was wanting more money, to be sure, but another part, it seems, was that they just didn't want to let go of the past. Underneath the earth on this lot were pots and pans, carpet from a long-demolished home and a taillight from a long-departed car. What precisely the owner couldn't let go of, we couldn't be sure. Yet, rather than succumb to the dirt, the land was eventually given to Habitat. We began to clear away these broken pieces so that this little plot of land might grab ahold of a new future with a home and a new family to bring laughter instead of garbage, to bring joy instead of abandonment.

Of course, what's different about that little plot of land from Paul's example is that Paul's got all sorts of reasons to

brag. Paul's life isn't an abandoned lot, but instead an entire castle built of obedience to God's Law that began when he was a baby. Even before he could make his own decisions, Paul was faithful. He says that he's blameless – BLAMELESS – before the law. Perfection was his identity, and yet, he says he wrote off this righteousness, counted it as lost. He treated this entire structure of faithfulness as an abandoned lot, full of refuse. And why? Because of Jesus.

Good news, right? Actually, it really is. Jesus reveals to us that the structures we've built to prop up our respectability we've built are just houses of cards, fake facades to cover our desperate need for redevelopment, for repurposing. So long as we hold on to these fragile towers, our dreams, our hopes, our visions will always falter because, let's face it, we're imperfect. Even our best laid plans run astray, if not amok! But if we hold tight to the future God's promised us, to the future God's given us, then

even if the world falls apart around us, even if the mountains crumble, we'll find life abundant in the promise of God, and despite our imperfection, we'll find peace in the perfect love of Christ.

That's one of the most catching, yet subtle things that Paul suggests. This strength, this assurance, comes from knowing Christ. This isn't just a happenstance relationship or accidental meeting, but a knowledge, an intimate engagement between the Creator of the universe and us, God's creations. This is a knowledge of preference, of choice, of intention. In other words, to know Jesus is, in a very real sense, to un-know other things, to learn new ways of doing and acting – **of living** – so that we enter into the newness of God and the future God's got in store for us.

That's part of the difficulty of progress, of entering into God's future. We try to operate in the same way and expect different results. A wise friend once shared this idea:

We can't use the same logic that created the problems that we have to solve those problems for the future. We need a new logic, a new purpose. We need to recognize that we've been grabbed by Jesus for a purpose greater than we could have even dreamed on our own. But that means, rather than white knuckle grip onto the bygone things that once gave us comfort or stability, we need to instead reach toward the purpose God's got in store for us. We're not a "what once was" people. We're a "the best is yet to come people."

Gerhard Forde – and there's a Lutheran name if I've ever heard one – once wrote that "Christianity is not the move from vice to virtue, but from virtue to grace." Part of the logic change that we need is to stop thinking that if we just change our behavior, God will love us, that if we act more virtuous, things will get better. Now, before you get too worried, I'm not saying behavior doesn't matter. Our

actions are central to our faith. But if we think our actions serve to prove to God that we're worthy, we'll always fail. Every time. We don't need to move from vice to virtue. We need to move from virtue to grace.

This means that, to live into God's future, we've got to grab hold of God's grace, because that grace has already grabbed hold of us. To expand on Forde's logic a bit, we're always caught up somewhere between vice and virtue. We are simultaneously broken and repaired, impoverished and redeemed, drowned by the weight of sin and raised to abundant life by the work of Christ. We are simultaneously sinners and saints. Our work will never prove that we're worthy of God's love. Only God's love on the cross proves that we're worthy. That's what grabs hold of us, what turns us from our own false sense of security toward renewed life, renewed hope, renewed faith.

That lot that we cleaned out this week will one day become a home to a new future. Notice what that means. For this plot of land, for Paul, for us all, grabbing hold of the new doesn't mean losing ourselves entirely or our forfeiting true identities. It does mean change, but it doesn't mean abandoning who God created us to be in the first place. The very best of us, the image of God that constitutes the core of our being, is like that plot. It needs clean out. It needs stumps pulled out, garbage carried off, and new structures built on top. But the foundation remains the same, whether that piece of land or these bodily pieces of life that we live. What we lose truly must die, but God will raise to life new and wondrous things, things that we can't yet imagine.

Let us together, then, grab hold of our life in Christ together here at CLC. I sense big things coming our way. There's something exciting and life-giving around the corner for us. But we can't expect the logic that produced the

problems we've faced to solve those problems. We need new thinking, new living, new life in Christ. We beings of vice and virtue need the grace of God to enter the future that God's got in store for us. Fortunately for us, that grace grabbed us in baptism, grabs us every week in communion, grabbed the entire world on a cross outside of Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago. Now it's time to trust that grace, to grab hold of it and follow Christ into that graceful future, to build a new home and a new future on this God-given plot of fertile soil that is each of our lives and our life together here at CLC. Amen.