

“Sabbath Reflections on Identity”

Philippians 3:2-11

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Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 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.

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

While this text does not directly address our theme of Sabbath, I believe it holds implications for us in terms of remembering *whose we are* and *who we are*. In one of my sabbatical classes “Ethnicity,” we talked about and we wrestled with its implications. What is Paul addressing and what is Paul getting at that the people then and we now need to hear?

When I first read Philippians 3:2, Paul writes: “Look out for the dogs and beware of them.” To my ears, I think that’s pretty harsh. I have a problem with Paul’s language initially, because I think, “You could be nicer. You’re talking to your brothers and sisters in faith and the church. Why do you have to be so mean?” And then, as we continue through the text, we see that he begins so harshly in some ways because he understands what is at stake. He understands the implications of when our identity is rooted anywhere other than in the person of Christ and the love of God. He comes out firing and so strong because the implications of ethnocentric identity and our achievements piling up around us create idolatries and a way of life that will destroy our souls and that will destroy our communities. Paul sees that to cling to anything other than Jesus is destructive and fatal. Rather than being harsh, Paul is honest.

In this text particularly, Paul addresses the problem that's coming up in the early church amidst the group called the Judaizers. They were Jewish people who had become Christians and were telling the Gentiles, or the Greeks, "If you want to become a Christian, and if you want to say you follow Jesus, then you, too, have to be circumcised the way we are and the way we have been for as long as we have been a people." Circumcision was the sign, and is the sign, of the covenant in the Israelite community. It was the way in which they were separate and set apart, knew and remembered who they were on their body apart from anyone else. [It's a whole other sermon to talk about the male/female dynamics of this practice in the community.] But, what we know is that within the community, circumcision was important for their knowing who they were and whose they were – a people gathered and marked out and belonging to the living God.

Thus, this is no small matter when they tell the Greeks around them: "Well, if you want to become a Christian, you take this mark on too, and if you don't, you're not in this new community that Christ has created." Paul sees a problem with this practice. He sees a problem that this line is drawn saying who is in and who is out. He sees a problem with the way that power and the privilege of that identity marker is being used to keep people from knowing and walking with Jesus Christ. He'll have none of it. The way in which he goes about addressing the problem of that identity marker is by using himself as an example. "Look, people. I am Jewish. I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the tribe of Benjamin, which happens to be on the level of importance with the tribe of Judah...meaning I'm very important in the Israelite identity landscape. My ethnic, religious, and national identities give me privileges and powers. But I've also chosen to live out of those privileges and powers in a way that brought me to persecute the church before I met Christ. I was a student of the law." We know from Paul's story that as a "Hebrew of Hebrews" he was held up in regard in the community as one who led the persecution against the church in that day until his own conversion.

He continues: "I did everything right, and I followed what I understood the implications of the law to be. But something happened when I met Christ. All

those things that gave me a sense of importance and power and privilege, all the achievements that I pursued that came out of my identity, somehow in meeting Jesus they didn't mean as much anymore. Somehow when I came into contact with the living God who had lived and breathed as me and had chosen to suffer for me and had lived into the power of his resurrection on behalf of the entire world, somehow when I came into contact with *that* living God, all of my powers and privileges and achievements didn't mean anything. I want to encourage you, this new church trying to make sense of who you are in the world now, to let some of these things go. It doesn't mean that you stop being Jewish. It means that you be that in a way that honors the living God and honors your new brothers and sisters. It doesn't mean that you hide and you pull back as a Gentile from your culture and your work. It means that you start being in those places in ways that point people to Christ at the center and not you at the center." Paul knows what is at stake if anything else but Christ in our life is at the center. He gives up all of his powers and privileges, credentials and assets, because something about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done has changed their level of importance.

One of the things that I observed over my extended Sabbath, my sabbatical, in Abidjan was an utter spirit of humility in the community. I sat in classes alongside people that I would shake my head thinking: "What am I doing here?" These people are heads of national churches and denominations. They are instructors, they are professors in the seminaries shaping the next generation of leaders of African churches. What am I doing here? All I had to do is listen and learn. And yet, one of those students in particular, whose name was Pierre, served as the "dean" of students. As a student, he took responsibility for the care and livelihood of the student community. Based on his character, his leadership, and his ministry, [he translated the Bible into one of the languages in Guinea as well as had been a pastor] he had the privileges and the powers of a particular kind of identity and leadership. He was known and respected for his work and who he was. And yet, every night at 6pm, Pierre was out in the back of the seminary property sorting the community's trash. He took a pitchfork out, threw on boots, sometimes flip flops, and he sorted through the recyclables, the things that could burn, the things that

would decompose, the things that would need to sit awhile and dry out before they could be burned. Every night at 6pm.

Additionally, one of the professors who lived on campus realized Pierre might need some help. So she decided to join him. Now, something that might be missed on us as Americans here is that as a professor in a community there, she “should not” have done that. She crossed all kinds of barriers and boundaries and expectations of what it meant to be a person with power and privilege to go back and now join Pierre in the humble work of sorting and burning trash, who had also crossed those boundaries in a different way. But, together each night at 6pm, they sorted trash. It was, to me, a sight to behold, that these two individuals, who in our mind and our world, didn’t need to deal with the trash, were back there doing that one simple, humble thing. After I had talked some with Pierre, getting to know more about his life and ministry, he left me with his final blessing sending of me back to the United States. He said: “Sister, life is hard and ministry will be difficult, and there will be challenges. But we serve Christ, and we keep our eyes on the glory of God in all that we do. And everything else is just part of living in this world.” He said it with such profundity and such power and such a quiet and kind way. It came out of the heart of a man walking so closely with Jesus that anything that might be built up around him to create a sense of importance didn’t matter if his life and if his ministry didn’t reflect the love and humility of Christ.

His example was a lesson for me, and it continues to be a lesson for me, to learn from Pierre and to learn from others in the class at the seminary there. You see, somewhere along the way, the verses of Philippians 3:7-8, “whatever gain I had, I lost them for the sake of Christ and counted them as nothing because of the wroth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord...” I had forgotten those words. I had begun to build up around me a sense of purpose, of worth, of value around what I achieved, what I could accomplish, what I could accomplish, what I could do, how I could lead. You name it. Life had become, over time, a way of living out the center that was not Christ. I needed these things around me to feel of value, to feel like I had something to contribute. And yet, I sat down with my brothers and sisters who would let all of those

things go, let all of the appearances, ethnic identity markers, and all of the achievements go, to walk with and love and be faithful to Jesus Christ.

Over these last three months, I have been blown over...would be the nice way of saying it. I have been de-centered. I have been made unstable to remember what matters, to recall what actually counts in life. If you knew me during my time of serving here, you also probably knew that I was insanely busy for terrible reasons. My friends would tell me: "You know, it's really hard to get time with you. It's really hard to get on your calendar. You've got everything going and I'd like some time, but it's hard to get you." That came out of not being centered in Christ, of not being able to stop long enough to hear God's voice and to be in relationship with those who mattered most. It came out of my pursuit of all of these things that would build up and give me importance the way Paul had this sense of importance and privilege. And yet, in his losing it, in his calling the church to lose those things for the sake of Christ, I hear that call to me, and I heard it in Abidjan alongside this community who lived that humility so well.

I wonder for you and for us, for this community here, what do Paul's words bring as an invitation and as a challenge? What are the powers that we put up around us that create lines of separation? What are the ways in which we choose power over getting low to the ground, over being on our face before a living God and serving his world? What are the things that we are clinging so tightly to it might rip our hands off if we hold on any tighter? In this community, in our families, in our lives, where is the invitation coming to let go, to let the person of Christ and the work of Christ...Jesus worked on our behalf...to let that actually mean something? To let him live in us and through us. I saw an image the other day that a friend had posted of a hand holding on to a rope, and I was very grateful for this image, because I knew what I was preaching today. This rope was burning and twisting the hand and causing this burn. It said: "What if sometimes letting go is less painful than holding on?" Holding on to the things that give us an image of security. Holding onto the things that build up our importance, when really our lives are a vapor. In the grand scheme of the globe we are a fleck. And yet, because we are not

centered in Christ, I think so much that we try to create this power and privilege and importance because we haven't known how much we have been loved and how much we have been sacrificed for by the living God. We fight. We've seen it in our country, and I think that was one of the most painful things to really watch at a distance over the last three months. To be out of a space in which I'm in daily conversation and life with my fellow Americans wrestling the realities of what our nation is and has been and is becoming. To come back from sabbatical and two weeks later, nine lives are destroyed. In a church. Because someone's identity was so fixed in a place of power and privilege that they didn't want to give up. Those nine lives were a threat to that identity. Plain and simple. It's not much more complex than the violence was about holding onto power. But, this is our land and this is our home. These are our people, these are our brothers and sisters who were killed.

Paul's words ring out to me personally: "Take down the things that you've built around you to give you importance and remember me." And they ring out to us: "Step away from the power and the privilege that you've grabbed. Don't let these lines that we have historically put between us that create so much division and so much tension. Don't let false identities define your life together. Because Christ went to the cross for all of that. Don't miss the power of the resurrection." The power of the resurrection is actually the source of life, and we and our lives are way more comfortable choosing death. It's just easier and it's the path of less resistance. Yet, we are invited by Paul in this text to choose Christ and to choose life, to let our life individually and together be shaped by a different reality. Paul comes back and he says: "Circumcision is OK. But it's not everything. Your achievements are good. I've made you gifted and talented people, and I want you to go bear fruit and bless the world with those. Those are good. Develop them and use them as a blessing. But don't throw them down as barriers to relationship. Don't throw them down as barriers to justice. Don't throw them down as barriers to equality. Don't throw them down so that you don't have to deal with me and what I've called you to as reconcilers in the world."

Christine mentioned that this fall I'm heading to grad school...more grad school, if there's ever such a time it ends...I'm heading to Emory well aware of the competition that runs at the center of the academic life, the pressures and the politics that shape the next five years of my life. I could choose easily to play that game. I could choose to pursue the accomplishments, the publications. I could kill myself physically to make the grade. And yet, this sabbatical and reflecting on this passage throughout it keep coming back over and over to me, telling me, "You can choose that, but you'll die in the process. You can choose the world and the kingdom of powers that are not of God. You can choose that world, or you can align with Christ and you can listen to him and walk with him." Sometimes that will be saying no to things that would pad the resume and CV and land me the job that I want. Sometimes that will be saying no to good opportunities for the sake of faithfulness where I'm called. This passage speaks over and over to me about my future. It speaks to us as a nation divided and broiling and killing. It speaks to us as brothers and sisters gathered here this morning, taking an hour to stop and pause and remember that out of resting in God alone we can remember who we are. Monday can be different because of that knowledge and that truth. Tuesday can be different because Christ has loved us. Wednesday can be different because we are reminded that humility matters over power. So I leave you with this text for your own meditations this week. I encourage you with a message of love and grace from God that he walks with us and will not leave us. The verbs in this passage show us that Paul was continuing to work out exactly what he was challenging the church with. He hadn't figured it out. He was stumbling this out too. I want you to stumble with me. Let's stumble well and stumble faithfully together, centered in Christ and knowing that it is in him and through him and by him that we live, move, and have our being. Nothing else can really compare.

Friends, blessings to you. Thank you for letting me have this space this morning. Know that you are loved and you are missed by me. But much more, you are loved by a good and faithful God who looks out and sees his children gathered to go out and bless his world. Be that blessing. Amen.