



**Joy in All Circumstances:
Paul's Encouragement to the Philippians and to Us
Wednesday Bible Study with Pastor Hetrick
September 30, 2020**

About a decade ago, George Clooney appeared in a movie called "Up in the Air" in which he played Ryan Bingham, who works for a human resources consultancy firm specializing in termination assistance. His work constantly takes him around the country, conducting company layoffs on behalf of employers to spare them the messiness of firing people. His signature line to the about to be fired was "Anyone who ever built an empire or changed the world sat where you're sitting right now ..."

Ryan seemingly mastered the art of business perks for all that travel and aspires to reach the goal of ten million frequent flyer miles with American Airlines. Despite mastering many things, he has no significant relationships. A series of life events make him start to question if he has missed the point, when on a flight home, the crew announces that he has just crossed the ten million mile mark. American Airlines' chief pilot is aboard to personally congratulate Ryan and notes he is the youngest person to achieve the milestone. They pour champagne, it is hollow. He is in up in the air with no one to celebrate with and no one waiting for him. He has a transformational moment about what really matters.

Being a high flyer doesn't add up after all. Once home he gives all the miles to a family member who just got married but couldn't afford a honeymoon. As the movie closes you see him standing at the airport, looking at the destinations board and letting go of his baggage. Where he will head next uncertain.

In Philippians, Paul touts his own high flyer status as a way to go on to say those things no longer have any value in comparison to the relationship he has been given through the death of Christ.

[Paul writes:] 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. 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. 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

In this passage Paul acknowledges he has already talked about this, but perhaps we hear it again because we all need a refresher- the regulations of the Law, in this case the Torah are not what save. Rather, it is faith in Christ, who died and is raised, that saves. Why is he bringing this up? Just before these verses, Paul has been speaking to the church at Philippi where there is indeed some dissension about what and who is right. There are those who are doing things for show and insisting others must as well. I think that can be just as much a challenge for us today in any number of ways.

Earlier Paul has said, "Do all things without murmuring and arguing," Philippians 2:14 "Shine like bright stars in a dark world." Rejoice! Now he says, "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!" Philippians 3:2 NRSV

Calling people a name, or calling them evil is one thing. There are those who are causing tensions about what is and must be done and required to be saved. In particular, in Paul's day, there are those who insist that in order to be Christ followers, one must first become a Jew, which for men means circumcision. Paul warns- don't get tangled up in this.

We can get caught up in goals that should not be the point of our striving. In this case, worshipping "rituals" as opposed to worshipping God. This is when Paul then includes his own autobiography of mastering such rituals.

Paul says, essentially "Look, I was not a marginal Jew." In other words, "I am not someone who was just looking for a reason to not follow our traditional practices and beliefs, in fact quite the opposite, I was zealous." He found value in excelling. BUT, he takes what would have been a claim of honor and stands it on its head. All those accolades are "rubbish." The Greek noun gently translated as "rubbish" actually means "poop." In the balance sheet of life for all the things I thought added up, I realize I was still operating at a loss. The things he thought were valuable, he has come to find are not. Everything pales in comparison because of Jesus Christ. Knowing Christ is worth more than any and everything else.

That's why I shared the plot of the movie, "Up in the Air."

Knowing Christ, is not just some book learning, memorizing a Bible passage, or getting a "Perfect attendance" pin. Paul is writing about deep personal knowledge and relationship. Both being known by God and in some way beginning to see the mystery of God and to be in communion with God. This relationship, is the source of our trust, and Paul can be authentic here- remember he is in prison.

Even now, Christ is also bringing transformation. Again, Paul emphasizes God's action: his making Christ his own follows upon Christ having already made him God's own. He calls us to wonder what Christ will do in and through those Christ has claimed when that person sets themselves and their baggage aside to be filled with the love of Christ and the Holy Spirit at work. What is interesting is that it is Paul's very training in the law that allows him to see a new interpretation, a change of perspective and orientation.

Just one symbol of that transformative power of Christ at work.

Within our own Christian history, another such figure is St Francis of Assisi who we commemorate this weekend, as we hold our drive up Pet Blessing. Born in Italy circa 1181, he was renowned for drinking and partying in his youth. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant and his mother was a beautiful Frenchwoman. Francis was not in want during his youth; he was spoiled, indulging himself with fine food, wine, and wild celebrations. By age 14, he had left school and become known as a rebellious teenager who frequently drank, partied and broke the city curfew. He was also known for his charm and vanity.

In these privileged surroundings, Francis of Assisi learned the skills of archery, wrestling and horsemanship. Expected to follow his father into the family textile business, he was bored by the prospect. He began daydreaming of a future as a knight; if Francis had any ambition, it was to be a war hero like them. It wouldn't be long before the opportunity for warfare beckoned. After fighting in a battle, Francis was captured and imprisoned for ransom. He spent nearly a year in prison — awaiting his father's payment — and began receiving visions from God. After his release from prison, as legend has it, while riding on a horse in the local countryside, Francis encountered a leper. Prior to the war, Francis would have run from the leper, but on this occasion, his behavior was very different. Viewing the leper as Jesus incognito, he embraced and kissed him, later describing the experience as a feeling of sweetness in his mouth. After this incident, Francis felt an indescribable freedom. His earlier lifestyle had lost all of its appeal.

Now in his early 20s, he began turning his focus toward God, spending an ever-increasing amount of time at a remote mountain hideaway and in old, quiet churches around Assisi, praying, looking for answers, and helping nurse lepers. While praying before an old Byzantine crucifix at the church of San Damiano, Francis reportedly heard the voice of Christ, who told him to rebuild the Christian Church and to live a life of extreme poverty. In order to raise money to rebuild the Christian church, he sold a bolt of cloth from his father's shop, along with his horse. His father became furious upon learning of his son's actions and dragged Francis before the local bishop. The bishop told Francis to return his father's money, to which his reaction was extraordinary: He stripped off his clothes, returned the money back to his father, and declared that God was now the only father he recognized. There is no indication that Francis and his father ever spoke again thereafter.

The bishop gave Francis a rough tunic, and dressed in these new humble clothes, Francis left Assisi. From now on, he would live according to the Gospel.

Francis began preaching around Assisi and was soon joined by 12 loyal followers. His embrace of Christ-like poverty was a radical notion at the time. The Christian church was tremendously rich, much like the people heading it, which concerned Francis and many others, who felt that the long-held apostolic ideals had eroded. Francis set out on a mission to restore Jesus Christ's own, original values and with his incredible charisma, he drew thousands of followers to him. Joining in his way of life, they became known as Franciscan friars. Like the apostle Paul, he was continuously pushing himself in the quest to know Christ, soon preaching in up to five villages per day, teaching a new kind of emotional and personal Christian religion that everyday people could understand. He even went so far as to preach to animals, which garnered criticism from some and earned him the nickname "God's fool." But Francis' message was spread far and wide, and thousands of people were captivated by what they heard.

Rest assured that Francis and Paul surely had moments where they were not sure they could be faithful, but they never doubted God would be. We share in resurrection, and we can share in transformation in the here and now. Being in Christ means being the body of Christ expressing his presence in the world. We are a work in progress and we are not there yet.

While Paul's letter to the Philippians speaks eloquently of regarding loss as nothing compared to knowing Christ, as people who are experiencing devastating loss or fear of loss we do not come naturally to such stoic altruism. We need practice, on a daily basis, to reframe our fear and grief as openings to divine mercy. Scriptures offer this teaching, but it takes daily focused attention to make it real in our lives—a devotional habit that many of us may struggle to embrace. We have resources in our tradition—and power in our God—to get through hard times, but the task of reframing and changing takes dedicated work. Know that God does not demand perfection. Yet, the power of Christ's resurrection can motivate us to press on toward the ultimate goal, eternal life with Christ. In truth we know it feels more like a marathon than a sprint. So, we are here to cheer each other in all circumstances to not lose hope or lost perspective. Paul encourages us- we have come this far. And when we are tempted to be stuck, or just turn away, to not be discouraged. This is what we can offer one another in and through Christ.

And so, grounded in our Lord's work and love for us, in closing I share the words of poet Padraig O Tuama's Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2017):

Lord, help us to embrace possibility, respond graciously to disappointment, and hold tenderly those we encounter. . . . May we support, may we listen, may we change."