

Sunday, October 4, 2020
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 22 (Year A)

Philippians 3.4b-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/772233316925421>

(Sermon begins at about 14:40)

“Claiming a New Identity”

I have to chuckle when I read the opening verses of today’s Epistle reading. In his letter to the Philippians, 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” (Phil 3.4b-6).

I chuckle because Paul has just been talking about the humility of Christ: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2.5-8). You remember this part from last week. But then, today, in the very next chapter, Paul goes off talking about himself. About his pedigree and credentials. Filling in a little detail on what is behind his statement, you get something like:

“If anyone has any reason to be confident in their status in Jewish society, it’s me. In fact, I defy anyone to be a more devout Jew than I am. I was circumcised when I was eight days old, as required by the Law. I am definitely Jewish, being born of the nation of Israel from a long line of Hebrews. In fact, I can trace my family line back to the Exodus. Not only that, I am from the tribe of Benjamin. Not just any old tribe, but the elite tribe that gave us King Saul, the first king of Israel. I’m a Pharisee, so my religious convictions are mainstream and solidly orthodox. And lest anyone doubt by commitment, I strictly adhere to God’s laws. In fact, I was such a devout defender of the purity of Judaism that I even hunted down and persecuted followers of Jesus. Okay, not something I’m particularly proud of now, but it does go to show how devout I am when it comes to matters of faith.”

All in all, Paul comes off sounding pretty impressed with himself. Did he not listen to himself when he talked about Christ’s obedience and humility as a model for our own lives? Now, of course, Paul had his conversion experience and that changed everything. At least he is no longer persecuting Christians. In fact, now he is one. So, his tone changes as he lives into what it means to be a Christian. In this passage—indeed, in the whole letter to the Philippians—Paul is seeking to be a source of inspiration to his audience. Writing from prison, where he is being persecuted for being a follower of Christ, Paul seeks to encourage and lift up the church in Philippi, which is similarly being persecuted. Paul seeks to encourage the Philippians through the example of his own life and how his thinking evolved as he came to embrace the Christian

faith. Through the example of how he has been able to find strength and comfort in his life of faith, through his relationship with Jesus Christ.

Essentially, Paul is presenting two opposing approaches to life. The first is based on what he refers to as confidence in the flesh. Confidence in the flesh is actually an oblique allusion to circumcision, which Paul mentions in the verse before the start of today's Epistle reading. But confidence in the flesh here and elsewhere in Paul's writings "refers more broadly to a reliance on weak and vulnerable human resources."¹ Or, as he writes in his First Letter to the Corinthians, "behaving according to human inclinations" (1 Cor 3.3). Strongly implying that it is our tendency to rely on our human inclinations—our unwavering reliance on self, on our pedigree and credentials and all that derive from them—that so often gets in the way of a true life of faith.

Paul's identity had been wrapped up in his nationality, his tribe, his specific religious affiliation. And while those things are important to an extent, and certainly inform who he is, he comes to recognize that these are not the most important parts of who he is. These things do not define who he is. What Paul is implying in this passage is that he has found a new identity. And his identity before? He counts that as loss. As worthy of nothing more than to be discarded as rubbish. All those characteristics and circumstances of birth that he was so proud of did not bring true righteousness. Did not bring the righteousness—the right relationship with God—that he sought. He is willing to put all that other stuff behind him so that, as he notes, "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" (Phil 3.9). He recognizes that he is not righteous because of who he is, because of his pedigree or credentials. He is not even righteous just because of adhering to the Law. We see where that got the Pharisees. No, Paul's righteousness comes through faith in Christ.

Through his conversion experience and coming to know Jesus Christ, and through his ministry of proclaiming the Gospel he has come to know Christ even more intimately. As a result, Paul has come to recognize that all that other stuff—his very impressive credentials and his opinion of himself—mean nothing. He realizes that he had been blindly following a bunch of religious laws because that was what he was raised to do. As an Israelite, as a Benjamite, as a Pharisaic Jew. That's what he had been told to do. But in coming to know Jesus, he realized that relationship with God is about more than blindly following God's Laws. Not that God's Laws are not important. They are. They have their place. But there is more. There is the promise of resurrection. There is the promise of new and eternal life. There is the promise of ongoing relationship with God. That's what Paul wants. He wants a fuller, more robust life. He wants a fuller and more robust relationship with God. One that can only come through Christ.

Paul comes to the place where he is willing and able to give up his former identity and all the benefits that were derived from that identity. All the physical and material benefits that he gained because of his credentials were as nothing compared with what Jesus promises. So, he is willing to give all that up to follow Christ. No matter what it takes. As he puts it, that he is even willing to "[become] like him in death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead" (Phil 3.10-11).

Paul does not presume that he has “made it,” that he has reached his goal. That just by giving up his former identity and taking on the identity of being a follower of Christ he has come close to being worthy of what Christ offers. He also recognizes that he cannot dwell on his previous identity. Instead, he needs to focus on what it means to live into his new identity in Christ: “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” (Phil 4.13b-14).

In the way Paul lays out a summary of his own faith journey and his understanding of what it means to be a Christian, he is really appealing to the Philippians not on the basis of his own credentials and his own achievements, but rather on the basis of their shared relationship as followers of Jesus Christ. Appealing based on their shared experience of how Christ has been with them and worked through them in their common ministry.

The underlying theme of what Paul is conveying to the Philippians during the uncertain times in which they are living is applicable to all who follow Christ. The things on which we place our identity are subjective, are impermanent. As people of faith, we have an identity that is far more significant than things that are skin-deep, such as nationality, race, family ties, organizational affiliations, and political identity. We have an identity that is permanent, that is unchanging and unchangeable, that is eternal.

In the uncertain times in which we find ourselves, when things are not the same as we have previously known; when, in many ways, we do not have ready access to some of what it is that makes us who we are, we need to find something new on which to base our identity. An identity not based on nationality or race or belonging to any number of groups. We need an identity that transcends and will sustain us through difficulties and uncertainties. Thankfully, we already have that. We merely need to embrace it and fully live into what that identity means, and how that identity informs how we live our lives, as we, with Paul, “press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3.14).

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2104.