

Knowing Jesus Christ  
Philippians 3:4b-12  
October 4, 2020  
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Today's sermon is modeled after Paul's testimony in Philippians. As Paul writes of what he has come to understand about Jesus, I, along with Pastor Dane, will share with you a piece of how we have witnessed Paul's loss in order to gain equation. I'll begin our sermon, and then Pastor Dane will conclude. We offer this as a way to invite you to think of your testimony – how you have come to know Christ, the power of sharing in Christ's suffering and resurrection, so that we together may strive toward God's heavenly call.

The Roman Empire in the first century, described PBS, mixed sophistication with brutality, and could suddenly lurch from civilization, strength and power to terror, tyranny, and greed." One's place in the empire was established by the family you were born into, the wealth you accumulated, or the power you wrestled until it became your own. The apostle Paul possessed such status markers. He was educated, and a Roman citizen. Firmly placed within the Jewish community, he boasted of his family's lineage, his role as a studier of scripture, and his passion for upholding the Torah, that sacred way of life. Whether one measures his status by education, family, achievement, energy, or ethnicity doesn't really matter, Paul held a winning score card.

Yet here in Philippians summing up his life, Paul writes, I left all of this status behind. I moved my assets over into the loss column, for the surpassing knowledge of knowing Jesus Christ.

The first thing to notice about Paul's message is what he is not saying. By counting those things of which he might boast as losses, Paul is not calling them invaluable. He is not confessing a sense of guilt about his past, an identity of which he is now ashamed. Instead, as preacher Fred Craddock notes, Paul is speaking about throwing away the good stuff, the cherished markers of a publicly acknowledged successful life. It is, Craddock says, like a man wearing an expensive suit who sees a child drowning. As he dives in to save the child, he must shed his suit coat, tie and shoes. The suit is still good, but is nothing compared to another's life. Or it is like pioneers traveling west by wagon, who must toss out a hope chest or kitchen table in order to ease the load and make it over the Rocky Mountains.<sup>1</sup> Paul has left behind aspects of his identity that he has cherished, because he is trading them for something far more valuable.

The second detail worthy of our attention is that someone of surpassing value: the illuminating presence of Jesus in Paul's life. So often we keep our gaze on what is given up by the person whose radical conversation causes them to leave everything behind. We say "Look what they left!" "Can you believe they gave up the car, house, job, future earnings, accolades?" In so doing, we ignore what they have gained: the joy with which they speak, the purpose with which they live, the love they exhibit for the One who is a treasure.

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred, "Throwing Away the Good Stuff" in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 246-249.

Paul meets Christ on an unsuspecting day, while traveling a familiar road, consumed with his chosen occupation. Christ comes to him, not interested in Paul's education, tribe, scholarly skill, accomplishments or zeal, nor dissuaded by Paul's already rejection of him. The light on the Damascus Road first renders Paul confused, frightened, vulnerable. The charity of other Christians, the aliveness of Christ's presence converts him, drawing Paul to Jesus who already knows him. Then, confesses Paul, I saw how all the things I had counted upon – my confidence in my own flesh – actually had kept me from knowing Christ, knowing how tenderly I am cherished, how much God wants to put me to work.

When I was graduating from divinity school, I faced the choice between continuing in academic work, pursuing another degree, accepting an appointment at a local congregation, or journeying overseas to serve in a missionary assignment. All three of the options were good ones. The two I didn't do – academic work and local church ministry – were choices I would later embrace. I couldn't shake the sense that God was calling me to leave what was comfortable, familiar, easily communicated identity or status for something I could not yet see. My 14 months of working in a mission church in Johannesburg, South Africa would become the time in which I met Jesus in a way I had never encountered before, and forged a relationship with Christ that guides me still. I met Jesus in the faces of children, who had seen too much trauma and yet still laughed, cried, wiped each-others' tears, and loved. I met Jesus in a committed church community, formed over meals, worship, commitment to keeping it real and willing to ask each other Is that action of Jesus? In those daily decisions that look small but are so consequential, I met Jesus in a global community of faith, where the sheer beauty of God's creation connected to call to live side by side with humility, all cherished children of God. I learned to trust Jesus who does call us, each of us, in our particular life, particular journeys, to place our lives in God's good care, entering into the mysterious equation of cross and resurrection; where our willingness to walk beside the world's great suffering and pain, opens us to redeemed life.

What Paul is describes, says Craddock, is downward mobility, I'm not sure Paul would describe it in that way. He'd say – this is outward mobility – stretching my life toward others. This is heaven-ward mobility. And no matter what you call it - it looks like I lost, but really, I gained – I gained the power of Christ, the assurance of his love, the hope of his future. And because he is at work in me, and I live his work for others, I press on. And press on.

And now Pastor Dane offers his words . . .