

Christ Presbyterian Church

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Rich Phenow

Philippians 3: Knowing Christ is What Matters

Philippians 3:1-11

I was told we should stall a little bit starting this morning because there could be people who weren't able to get through from the east. I live seven minutes from the church, and it took me almost half an hour to get here. All the streets are blocked off. I tried every way. I knew 70th Street was closed so I tried 66th. Then I tried some side streets and got back on the Crosstown and went around and got to church. Why I'm telling you all this is—the numbers are down this morning, maybe not because of that but because people may have heard I was preaching today.

If you are at all like me, and I assume that you are not, do you ever find yourself pondering these esoteric questions that I ponder at times, questions about what really matters in life? Do you ever wonder about the meaning of your life? What is it all about? Why are you here? Do you ever pause long enough from the pace of life and have this healthy period of questioning, questioning what matters the most? When I pause to ask that question, "What matters the most?" I'll be honest. At times I get overwhelmed because the questions just keep coming. If truth be told, I even get a little bit discouraged because if I do come up with some answers, I realize I'm not living up to the answers that I get. I feel like a failure when that happens. Is what matters the most my personal happiness? Is what matters the most that I am liked by you? One thing I know for sure is, I don't want to be admired by you. I heard a great definition for narcissism. Narcissism is when our desire to be admired becomes greater than our desire to be liked. I don't want to be admired because I will disappoint you, and I will feel disappointed as well, but is that what matters? Does it matter that I am liked by you? Is my personal happiness about me being completely fulfilled and at peace and totally content with what I do?

As a young boy growing up in north Minneapolis, what mattered most to me were sports. I played football and hockey and I played basketball. I even boxed Golden Gloves for three years. I did that primarily to protect myself against my six brothers, but sports were *everything* to me. I loved sports. I was consumed by a life of sports because it was the one place that I felt the best about myself. It was the one place that I could escape from all the other hard places in my life. From early spring as soon as the snow melted, I began to prepare myself for the sport of all sports, the sport that mattered most—baseball, America's sacred pastime. When I began to prepare for baseball, I would take my glove out of the garage, I would oil it and put a ball in the pocket. I would wrap the glove with rags or with string and put it in the crotch of a tree. Why? Not because I was crazy but that is what baseball players did to reshape the pocket for the upcoming season. Even with the ground still wet, we began the journey. We started with whiffle ball down at Hope Lutheran in the parking lot. Then as soon as we could, we got over to the tennis courts at Bohannon Park and began to play with tennis balls, a game we called Over the Fence.

I played Little League and I played Pee Wees. I played Cubs and I played Legion ball, I played ball up at St. Joe's. I played baseball in Collegeville at the college. Hundreds, maybe thousands of games. Baseball! I was on every team. In football, I was no. 33. In basketball, I was no. 33, but in baseball, I was no. 3. Summer nights and weekends, I loved to listen to the Twins on the *real* radio, WCCO, 830. I loved listening to that raspy voice of that cigar-smoking character, Halsey Hall. What a voice! I loved the great commentary and smooth sound of calls by Herb Carneal. Now I love John Gordon. I can't get enough of John Gordon and Dan "The Dazzle" Gladden.

Every summer we would have a special outing to the Met, a twilight double header. The reason was you could go to two games for the price of one. It meant you spent the whole day at the ballpark. We prepared by bringing sandwiches and snacks and, if we were lucky, we could get a hotdog or a coke and a bag of peanuts. We sat in the cheap seats in left field. The reason was you would have a chance of catching a ball hit by No. 3. What mattered most to me was baseball, and I wanted most to be like No. 3, Harmon Killebrew. My childhood dream was to play major league baseball, but I didn't quite play the game like Harmon. The only things that we had in common were that we both hit really high fly balls (but mine were inside of the park) and we shared a similar body type. I hit pretty well for a catcher. When I wasn't catching, I would play at that hot corner at third base. I had few claims to fame during in my career in baseball. In my junior year in high school, I played in the state finals against Paul Molitor. After that game I had a few brief conversations with scouts from Kansas City and Oakland, knowing full well if I responded to them, I would have been sitting on a bench somewhere replaying the movie *Bull Durham*, but baseball was all that really mattered.

As many of you know, we have been journeying through a Book written by Paul, the Letter to the Philippiian church. In this book Paul is writing from a prison in Rome. He is writing to the church at Philippi to encourage them in their faith. He is writing to them this morning to tell them what matters most. The question of what matters most is answered in these 11 verses. I would encourage you to follow along with me in your pew Bible. It is on page 1,750 and take out a pencil. We love it when you write in the Bibles because it tells us you are engaged. Or, you can look at it on the screen. Hear the Word of God as it comes to us from Paul in Philippians 3:1-11.

¹ Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

Some of the themes that Paul is writing this morning in these verses to the Philippiian church, he has written to some of the other churches on his missionary journey. Then he says this:

² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If others think they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord....

Everything else is loss, Paul says, other than the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ as his Lord.

...for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

May God add a powerful blessing for readings of this, His Holy Word. Amen

In these verses Paul answers the question, what matters most. He starts this off in the first verse with part of the answer. Part of the answer is “rejoice in the Lord,” the first verse. You see, this is Paul’s joy letter, but he is writing it from a prison in Rome. He is telling them that even in difficult times and in hardship, we can still be grateful. It is my personal belief that sometimes we as followers or those of us who are interested in following Jesus take ourselves far too seriously. At times we can be some of the most sober people. I love hanging out with a group of guys from my community. We play racquetball two nights a week. I’m really not totally sure where these men are in their faith. I know a couple of them are seekers and maybe nominal believers and a couple are not even convinced yet, but I love being with these guys. These guys are joy-filled guys. These are guys that laugh and aren’t all that intense. These are guys who aren’t burdened by spiritual baggage. I love being with my non-believing buddies because they remind me that it is not as difficult as we want to make it to follow Jesus and, really, it is not all that serious. But Paul says we are to be rejoicing in the Lord even in the midst of hardship. Right away part of the equation of what matters most is that we need to develop a posture of rejoicing in the Lord. We need to be filled with gratitude for all we have. We are abundantly blessed people. In this country we have freedoms and liberties. We have food and we have health. We have creation and we have flowers, a garden club that shows up in the rain on Saturday morning to plant for us. We have talents, and we have attributes that are unique to us. Could have an *amen* that we have a lot to rejoice about? Could I have it?

All: Amen!

Paul says, “Do you want to know what matters?” Our posture, our attitude of gratitude for all the blessings that we have. That is part of the equation. Then in verse 2 he launches into these three warnings. I love these warnings. He basically says, “Beware! Watch out for dogs, evildoers, mutilators of the flesh.” Harsh words! These are words that Paul is directing to believing Christian Jews. These are Jewish converts who are insisting that these non-Jewish believers in Philippi, these Gentiles, need to be circumcised. The judaizers are saying that the Gentiles aren’t completely restored followers of Jesus because they are not circumcised. This group is all hung up on this external thing that defined their identity, but Paul makes it clear that it is no longer about external things. It no longer matters whether somebody who embraces Jesus through faith is circumcised because, Paul says, “What matters is something going on in the inside, and that is the circumcision of the hearts of the believers in Philippi.” You see, Paul was excited about the internal transformation that was taking place in the followers in Philippi.

Paul says that worship wasn’t just taking place now like another spiritual ritual or behavior but was happening with the Holy Spirit involved. Wow! New worship! Holy Spirit-involved worship with uncircumcised Gentiles. Amazing that they could have Holy Spirit worship! And new

believers are giving Christ all the credit and the glory in their lives. It is right there in the text. And these new Gentiles were no longer putting their faith in the confidence of their flesh, their circumcision, but they are putting their confidence in their changed lives that have happened by an encounter in faith. Our culture and our world honors the externals, but it is really about how we look on the outside that helps define us on the inside. We have been told by our culture that those who are the brightest and the best and the most beautiful and the richest, the ones who are the most powerful and drive the nicest cars and live in the biggest homes are the ones who have what matters most in life. But Paul is simply saying, "What is the condition of your soul? Is it circumcised? Is your heart circumcised? Have you been transformed by the love of God?"

These judaizers are motivated by elitism. They have all sorts of spiritual pride in keeping their rituals and their laws, but Paul tells them that their efforts couldn't bring them a step closer to winning their salvation because it is not about circumcision. It is not about externals. It is about the heart. Paul says, "When the heart is involved, amazing things happen in worship that give God the glory." Now in verse 4, Paul is even worked up more. Right here in verse 4, we gain a window of insight into Paul. I love reading Paul's writings. Paul is a guy who has never struggled with his self-esteem. He is a guy who has an overstated sense of himself and rightfully so. Paul's greatest battle is not with his self-esteem. It is his nature to want to brag a little. He tells us that. He says that if there is anybody who has a reason to brag a lot, to be arrogant, then it should be he. What really mattered most before Paul encountered Jesus on that road to Damascus in that vision, what defined Paul, were all things that he could brag about. Listen to this. He tells us about his résumé, his connectedness, his accomplishments.

"Born a Jew, circumcised on the eighth day," the right day, an external sign of his connectedness. He was a pure Jew. He was "a Hebrew among Hebrews," no other ethnic groups infiltrated Paul's genealogy. Paul is a blue blood. He is a blue blood because he is "of the tribe of Benjamin." Paul has all kinds of connectedness in his genealogy, and as to his knowledge, Paul is a surpassing intellectual. Paul has a Ph.D. He is a Pharisee. He is part of a select, elite group, a group that not only knew the law but followed the law, every bit of it. And as far as passion and zeal? Paul said he had a whole bunch of it because for a long time he was notorious persecutor of the church. Of all of the very important things in Paul's time, in his culture, external things defined whom he was. Paul says, "You add those all up together, you add the currency of all that, all of the balance of what mattered most and suddenly," he says, "it doesn't matter at all." It is lost. He knew that his accomplishments were not about his partnership with God in the project of his justification. Paul's justification had nothing to do with the externals and nothing to do with him. It is not about our credentials. It is not about our résumé. It is not about the things we have done or haven't done. It is not about our worthiness or our unworthiness. It is about the heart.

Paul says, "Here is what matters most. It is simply all about Christ. It is simply all about knowing Christ and our response to Him." Paul says, "I consider these things garbage to what matters most. What mattered most to Paul was to gain Christ, to know Christ, to be redefined by Christ. Paul's deliverance happened because of Christ, and Paul's response is a response of trust and obedience. What matters most in life, Paul says, is faith in Christ. It is to know Christ, and to know that all the likeness comes from God, and, truthfully, all we have to do is receive it.

I ask you what does it mean to know Christ because knowing Christ doesn't mean that he wants to produce within us a bunch of rule followers, folks who would do their spiritual life simply out of obligation rather than a desire from their hearts. Jesus didn't say that He came to give us rules

to follow. Jesus simply said that He came to give us a life, a full life, and what He wants us to do is to grow and to flourish in our lives so that we can encourage others in our joy and our love. The goal of our spiritual life, the goal of our circumcised heart, the inner life, is to have our character develop and shaped to look like Christ in a way that uniquely fits ourselves. So knowing Christ means having our character shaped by God, not by the external things that define our culture but by the internal things.

What I realized on Friday when I watched the funeral service of Harmon Clayton Killebrew, the “Killer,” was that so little was said about his accomplishments. This guy hit 573 homeruns—before steroids! In 1969 he was a MVP. The guy drove in 140 runs and hit 45 balls over the fence. These things about his résumé were barely mentioned at his service. He started a foundation to raise millions of dollars for Miracle League, a league where special fields were developed so that every kid regardless of his disability would get a chance to run the bases and swing a bat and ball and jump on home plate. Harmon wasn’t perfect. He made mistakes. He had a failed marriage, and he had some failed enterprises, but the fact of the matter is that the people who knew him loved his character—not his résumé.

The things that he taught were the things that we are talked about. One point about him is this. Harmon was a gentle, generous, compassionate human being who just happened to be a great baseball player. Some of his own quotes, listen to these, they are incredible. I’d love to be quoted like this. He said, and it was in this morning’s paper, “Life is precious and time a key element so let’s make every moment count and help those who have greater needs than our own.” He said, “Always give more than you take.” “Know your neighbor.” “If you are loved beyond measure, then you should share it beyond measure.” “Go out of your way to do something for somebody you don’t know.” How radical is that? Somehow Harmon made people around him feel of great value and significance. Everybody around him felt connected to him.

At his service the pastor who presided asked, “How do we want to be remembered? What will our legacy be when all the external things fade away and no longer define whom we are? What will be said about us? What will be said about our character?” He said this about Harmon: “He was a man who cared for those whom God placed in his life.” He said that Harmon was a man of faith who believed in God’s plan of redemption in Jesus. The pastor then asked, “How does God want *us* to make a difference?” He said, “It is not through seeing life as an opportunity for prestige and power but, really, life is about a purpose, a purpose of knowing Jesus, a life filled with a purpose of faith and then living for people.” That is what Harmon did. He was a man of faith. All his accomplishments are external things but it is His heart and His character that God wants to develop in each one of us, simply through faith and through coming to know Him. It is not about résumés. It is not about externals. It is about a decision of faith, Paul said. It is about knowing Jesus, and it is about living in the power of the resurrection. It is about growing and flourishing and finding joy. It is not about what defines us but who defines us.

Who defines you? How is your character development going? Are you one who has said yes to knowing Christ? Are you one who understands the power of faith and the power of the resurrection? We are called to be power-filled people. We are called to be people who flourish and grow. We are not called to be serious, navel-gazing folks. We are called to rejoice in the Lord always. Paul says, “Rejoice!”

One of my favorite psalms that we sing here is this. It is called *Knowing You Jesus*.

Knowing You, Jesus, knowing You
There is nobody else.
You're my all, You're the best,
You're my joy, my righteousness,
And I love You Lord.

And I love You, Lord. Let's pray.

Gracious God, it is important that we get the idea that it is not about the externals. It is not about us and our accomplishments, but it is about You. It is simply about knowing You and having faith in You. It is simply about the power of our purpose in You, and like Harmon, an imperfect person, You call us to trust You, to be obedient to You and to grow in knowing You. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.