

June 14, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

Telling Our Own Story

Philippians 3:1-21

Rev. Earl F. Palmer
Preaching Pastor-in-Residence

This is our sixth sermon in the series that we've been preaching on St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. Today in this examination of the third chapter, we see Paul once again share his own life story. Three times, in the book of Philippians, Paul will share autobiographically about his own journey, his own journey of faith, how he came to trust Christ and his confidence in Jesus Christ as Lord. He does it three times in the letter. In the first chapter, remember, right after he prayed for the people, he said, "don't worry about me. I'm in the Roman prison. The Praetorian guards are my guards, I'm having a chance to share the gospel with those in the Praetorian guard. So don't worry about me," and then he goes on to share, again, autobiographically about it. And he says, "As for me, I have my life, my death, both in my mind at the same time. I want to live for Christ, and if I die, it's for gain because I'm in his hands. I leave my life in his hands." He shares that in the first chapter. Then, in the fourth chapter, Paul will say, "I have a secret that I've learned that I want to share with you." I like to think of that fourth chapter as the secret of Saint Paul we will look at that next week.

And now in the third chapter, once again, he shares his own faith, his own confidence in Christ. Listen to how he does it. As we start with verse 4. "If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, in their body, in their own life journey, I have more. I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of

the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin,” that’s one of the best tribes, “a Hebrew, born of Hebrews. As to the law, a Pharisee,” he’s proud of that, “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church and 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 as my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things. 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 that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and sharing his sufferings, become like him even in his death, so if somehow, I’m also might attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached my 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 one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul is sharing his own story. He does it three times in this one book. I was wondering why does he do that? Why does he, three times, share his own centeredness in Christ? Why is he so careful about sharing the fact that Jesus Christ is able to hold on to his life and is faithful so that he trusts him completely?

I can think of many reasons. The first reason is to keep the Philippians from going astray. I think that’s why he shares personally and autobiographically. He wants to keep the Philippians from going astray. I think in the first chapter, when he says, “Don’t worry about my imprisonment,” I think that was to keep them from going astray in this way. They perhaps would be tempted to overrate the power of the Roman tyranny of Nero. Paul is a contemporary of Nero. He’s in an imprisonment that’s a fatal imprisonment. His Philippian friends have sent Epaphroditus and try to protect his life in this imprisonment. They were probably worried very much about him and also about themselves, how is Paul going to make it at this point in the Roman first century. And Paul, I think in the first chapter, when he shares about his own life, is trying to challenge them not to vector from their confidence in Christ because of how dangerous is the world they’re living in.

This is appropriate for us today. A lot of people think, really, worry about the impact of an economic downturn and we are tempted to overrate the danger. We overrate even the economic danger. We see it as more powerful than it really is. And Paul in his century with their dangers wants them not

to worry that Rome is more powerful than it is. Evil is dangerous but not ultimately dangerous. The only thing the devil can really do is tempt us. Don't worry about the evil forces and what they can do. We then empower Satan through the back door and Paul doesn't want that. And so I think that's one of the reasons he does that sharing in the very first chapter is because he doesn't want these Philippians to think that evil is more powerful than it really is, as if they need to do some special things in order to be protected from evil. I think that's one reason.

I think the second reason in the third chapter is the problem of tribalism so that they'll go astray toward tribalism. Isn't it curious that tribalism was a huge problem in the first century Just as it is in our century. There were a group of people that were saying to the Gentile Christians that, "You, men, have to be circumcised to fulfill the law of the covenant that was given to Israel." And if you don't fulfill that covenant given to Israel, that is, if you're not a part of that tribe, then you won't really satisfy what God wants. This error in teaching became a great issue. The First Ecumenical Council of the church had to settle in Acts 15 and it was settled in Acts 15. The Greek men did not have to be circumcised in order to be Christians. They just had to trust in Christ. And it was Paul who helped Saint Peter and also Saint James at the First Ecumenical Council to agree to that. But evidently the people in Philippi haven't known all about that and there's a group of people that have come in and have told the men they all have to comply with that Jewish standard. That's why he starts the third chapter rather harshly. He says, "Look out for the dogs. Look out for those people who want to mutilate your flesh." That's kind of a harsh way to start the third chapter. And then, when he points to his own story, he said, "If anyone is proud of their flesh, it should be me. I was circumcised on the eighth day." If these men are circumcised now, it will be when they're 35 or 40 years old. That's more painful then, too. And he said, "I was circumcised on the eighth day. I was a Jew of Jews. I was of the tribe of Benjamin," and you can't beat that, "and yet, all of that, I considered loss when I met Christ because he is so much better." And so Paul wants to warn them. He wants to set them free from vectoring into tribalism. It's a sad reality in our century too, isn't it, how today, in the world we live in, tribalism has again become one of the most dangerous things, most dangerous forces in the world today, where one group of people see their own special identity in a certain way and then see others as enemies because they are different. And so Paul wants to head that off and I think that's the reason he tells his own story. That's the reason he brags about his own pedigree to say, "Hey, that is nothing compared to

knowing Christ. We are the true circumcision, those who belong to Christ.” So I think the first reason for Paul sharing autobiographically is to keep his friends from going astray. Sometimes when someone tells you their own story, it helps to keep you on track. But he has the second reason too.

I think the third reason he shares is because it’s possible for people in a place like Philippi, to kind of forget and to lose track of what they first learned of what they first knew. In a sense, they forget, maybe they didn’t pay close attention. They became Christianized. They became a part of the Christian culture maybe at Philippi, but they’re not really sure why. They’re not really sure of what it was and what is the most basic core of their faith, and so they became vague and sort of generalized in their convictions but not specific. They didn’t know the real source of their hope.

When I was at Princeton Seminary, our first year in school, we were in all these 101 classes; 101 Theology, 101 Church History, and I still remember being in 101 Church History; Norman Victor Hope was the professor of my history class. All of the incoming students in my class, were required to take 101 Church History. Dr. Hope would be talking to us and he would try to engage us as a class and he would bring up some great theme of the Christian faith, maybe something about Calvin or something about Luther and he would throw a question out to us and say, “Now, who has the answer to that question?” And nobody in our class would raise their hand and answer it, and then he would say, “Well, surely you know this.” That became his famous line to us, “Surely you know this.” And so our class developed a good answer for that. Somebody from the class would answer back, “No, Dr. Hope, that’s next semester when we’ll learn about that.”

So members of our class started to say that to Dr. Hope, “Next semester, Dr. Hope, is when we learn that.” But he had the last laugh, when one day he said, after somebody said, “Well, next semester, we learn that,” he said, “Well, I’ll tell you one thing. Next semester is going to be very hard for you guys because you have to learn an awful lot next semester.” We were vague, we were Christianized. These great themes were not really ours. Thankfully in the next semester, I hope we got them. It can happen. These people at Philippi can become very generalized in their faith and, yes, we’re for it all and we were a part of it and we have some wonderful stories in the past, but maybe the content of their faith of knowing the gospel and the life of Christ -- maybe they’re a little vague about what it actually is.

About three years ago when I was in Seattle, Dr. David McCullough, the historian, came and gave a speech to a large meeting. There were a thousand

people in the room. He electrified that audience. He is, of course, a fantastic historian. He wrote the book *Truman*. He wrote the book *John Adams*. He wrote the *The Trail Between the Seas* about the Panama Canal. He's America's premier historian right now, and it was just a marvelous speech. In the speech, he was on the warpath for history saying that he was very worried that American students and youth were not learning the history of America. And they weren't taught the basic events of America's history in universities anymore. He told about being at Yale, his own school. And he was there, he said, a few weeks before. He was asked to speak to a group of National Merit Scholar students; there were about 23 of them that were set apart to meet with the famous historian and Yale alumni, David McCullough. And he said, "I sat with these students and we were preparing to have two hours together, so I thought I would just do a little sounding at the beginning so that we could talk through our time together." And so I said to the students, "Let me just ask you a question and then we can go on with our conversation. Tell me who George C. Marshall is." And then he told us, "Of the 23 students, only four knew who George C. Marshall was. George C. Marshall was the chief of staff of the United States Army in World War II. He's the one who appointed Dwight Eisenhower as the general of Operation Overlord. He was secretary of state of the United States. Because of him was the Marshall Plan." He said that some students said they thought maybe that George C. Marshall was the one that founded Martial Law. That's even spelled differently. "Of these 23 students," he said, "only four or five of them knew who George C. Marshall was." And he was very upset about that. But then he made this statement. He said, "I looked out over these students and they were wonderful students. They were bright students. But when I looked at them, I began to grieve because it seemed to me they were all like cut flowers." Cut flowers. Beautiful but with no roots, no root system. Cut flowers. I think that's what Paul is worried about at Philippi. Are these Philippians rooted? Could they become cut flowers? Oh, we're so proud and we remember that we once heard a great man named Paul that was here once and some of the amazing things happened here, and now we're all Christianized. We're all Christians now. But are they really sure as to their root system, as to what they believe and the sources of their belief.

Can I tell you story, a true story? In 1985, my family and I fulfilled a dream that we had for a long time. I had been dreaming of this for a long time and that we would take our kids, while they were still young in college and high school and take the Trans-Siberian train. I always wanted to do that. And by the way, I'll tell you something, in those days, it didn't cost that much. \$340 was the fare to go from Beijing to Helsinki on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. We first went to Beijing and took that train, first, the

Trans-Mongolian Express to Irkutsk and then the Trans-Siberian train for eight days across Russia, ending up at Helsinki. I wanted to do that trip and one thing I wanted to do was to go to, of course, Moscow and then to go to Leningrad. It was Leningrad, now Saint Petersburg. And I wanted to see the Hermitage Museum with my kids because in 1968 my wife and I had been to the Hermitage and I was so struck by it, but our kids were infants then. I wanted them to see it as young adults. The greatest museum in the world is Catherine the Great's Palace in Saint Petersburg called the "Hermitage." There are more great pieces of art in that museum than any museum in the world, more than the Louvre. The largest collection of Rembrandts is at the Hermitage, not in Amsterdam but in the Hermitage. Catherine the Great collected them. We hired a guide just for us, for our little five, and the guide was extremely knowledgeable and powerful. She even held up a card as we went around even though there were only five of us, she was used to large groups and so she took the card, held it up and we went around through the entire museum. We had her guidance throughout the day. We saw the Renoirs even El Greco's. There's everything there in that museum and she knew everything. She told us about all the paintings. It was just a marvelous experience.

And the final stop, it's usually this way in the Hermitage, is the Rembrandt collection because the Hermitage is proudest of all of the Rembrandts. And in fact, if you buy the Hermitage Museum book, on the cover is "Return of the Prodigal," Rembrandt's last painting, probably his greatest painting, the large painting of the "Return of the Prodigal" with the father and his son knelt before him and perhaps the elder brother in the shadows. She took us around and explained all the paintings, and she knew so much. I just listened.

Now at the Rembrandt collection I know more about that great artist. I could have given my kids a lecture on Rembrandt. I had given lectures on Rembrandt, but I want to learn from her so we just went around and she told us everything. And then the last painting was the greatest one. We stood now with a large crowd of people in front of the "Return of the Prodigal." It's a huge painting, and she said, "Now, this is the greatest painting." And she said, "Notice the hands of the father." She explained that in the tradition of art, most art critics would say in all of art the two hands of the father on the shoulder of this boy are the greatest of all portrayals of hands not clutching him, not controlling him, but setting him free. Absolutely magnificent hands. And then she said this, "Notice the hands as the blind father welcomes his son."

Now I had been very dutifully listening to her every word. I didn't say one word. But at this point, I decided I just had to say something. I said, "No, that's not right." And so, I recited the parable of the prodigal son. I said, "This is Rembrandt's painting of the parable of the return of the prodigal son. It is another scene in the Old Testament where a blind father blesses his son who tricks him. Remember, Jacob tricked Isaac into blessing him. That's the blind father blessing his son. This is not that." And I recited to her the parable of the prodigal son. The whole point of the parable of the prodigal son is that the father had very good eyesight. The text in Luke 15 says it clearly, "When the boy was a long way off, the father saw him and ran to him and then welcomed the son." And then the elder brother who's out in the dark at night, sulking, and the best part of the whole parable of the prodigal son is when the father went out in the dark and found the elder son and gave the best promise of all to the elder son, "Son, everything I have is yours." The whole point is that he can see, so I said that to her. And after I said it, she said, "Oh." That's all.

Then we were driving home. We were riding home back to the hotel, and my son and my daughters were proud of me and they said, "Dad, you stood up to her. We're proud of you." But then we got to thinking about this. She made a point telling us that her main job, except for our family, was escorting American university students through the Hermitage and had been doing it for, she said, seven or eight years. American students. And then I thought to myself, she has been for eight years telling American students, university students, "Notice the blind father as he blesses his son." And evidently no one has challenged her effectively. Maybe she's terrifying. She was a very authoritarian guide, so it could be that. But nobody challenged her evidently; and then I realized why -- because American students don't know the parable. American students don't know the Bible. They don't know it. That's the greatest story in all of literature and many of them have no real awareness of its exciting plot.

Many would say that the greatest short story in all of literature is our Lord's parable of the prodigal son, and yet they don't know that the father can see. They may think that the boy who comes home is tricking the father for a blessing. That's Isaac and Jacob. That's not the father in this parable by Jesus. God sees you. He knows where you are. He knows all about that boy. That's what makes it grace. He's not being tricked into blessing that boy. He knows all about that boy, and he knows all about the angry son too who is out in the dark; the father has eyesight good enough to find him too. That's the gospel. And these kids don't know it. They don't know who George C. Marshall is. A lot of older people don't know who George C. Marshall is.

And I thought to myself, "Cut flowers." I didn't think about it then but when I heard David McCullough I realized that none of us wants to be cut flowers. The apostle Paul does not want these Philippians to be cut flowers. He wants them to know who Jesus Christ is and I think that's why three times he repeats his own discovery of Jesus Christ so that they will know the content of our faith, so we will know why we believe not that just we've been Christianized, but to know what we believe.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this great text that Paul wants us to know what we believed. He wants us to know the source of our hope -- not that just we, in a general sense, have hope. So may that be true for us. Lord, help us to gather the content of our faith so that we can know. In Christ's name, we pray, Amen.

Earl Frank Palmer Copyright © 2009 All Rights Reserved

Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202/537-0800