

Sermon: Turning Back to the Future

Year C, Fifth Sunday in Lent

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#); [Psalm 126](#); [Philippians 3:4b-14](#); [John 12:1-8](#)

Offered April 7, 2019 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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Do you guys know what a humble-brag is? It's when you point out a challenge in your life that only arises because frankly you are so awesome. "It's a tough call to decide between Harvard and Yale." "I can't really decide which dress I should wear to the governor's mansion." "My investment income is just driving my taxes through the roof." Any one else got some good examples? [Examples]

Yeah. So that's what a humble brag is. Paul didn't know what one was either. He was more into the traditional brag-brag. *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.* (Philippians 3:4b-6) Whatever status there was in his society, he had it. Ivy League education, expensive car, good suits, fancy title at a Fortune 100 firm, summer house, boarding school for the kids. He had it all.

He says to the church at Philippi, *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.* (Philippians 3:7-9) So he's saying that all that status stuff, all those accomplishments which put him at the top of the heap, are rubbish. In fact, the word in Greek is more earthy, more like what comes out of the south end of a north bound mule.¹ He's saying that all those things which were on the asset side of the ledger are now on the liability side.²

Except that when you watch Paul in action, you see that that is not the case. He founds his churches, like the one at Philippi, the one that was so dear to his heart. Then he goes off to found another church and other so-called Christians come along and cause chaos. The church writes to Paul and Paul writes back to try and straighten out the misunderstanding. When Paul writes to straighten the churches, he inevitably uses all those skills and talents to make his argument about how the churches are *to know Christ and the power of his resurrection* (Philippians 3:10).

Paul knows the Law, knows how the Pharisees think the Law should be observed. Paul knows how to frame an argument, how to reason his way to the heart of a theological issue. He knows all this stuff because of his life before. And all those skills, all those talents, are vital for the work he is doing now. He may say that everything he had in his life before has to be written off as a loss, but when you watch Paul serve his churches, you don't see him walking away from them. He's not sorry he was born into the tribe of Benjamin, any more than he feels as if he has

¹ Morna D. Hooker, "Fifth Sunday in Lent, Exegetical Perspective, Philippians 3:4b-14" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 137.

² Hooker, 137.

to apologize for being blameless under the law.³ It is just that none of those things ever got him one inch nearer to where Christ called him to go.⁴

We have this image that repentance, turning around, turning away, means giving up something. And, in a way, of course, it does. We walk away from chocolate or cursing or booze. Or we add in more volunteering, but that is a giving up of time that we probably don't have anyway. Somehow, it has this flavor of punishment. *No more cookies for you.* No T.V. because you were mean to your kid sister. When we repent, we have this only too human tendency to look over our shoulder at what we're giving up, what we're walking away from.

And it doesn't have to be a thing we really want in our lives. Drinking to excess, spending too much time at the office, thinking of ourselves as less talented than everyone around us, putting our spouses and kids first 100% of the time. None of those things are entirely healthy. Walking away from them would probably bring us closer to the person God is calling us to be. But they are what we are used to. And we like what we are used to. So when we give them up, even for the best of reasons, even when we want to give them up, we miss them. It's just human nature.

Paul gets that. First he wants the church at Philippi, wants us, to turn around, to face into the future. For him it's like a runner leaning in at the end of the race,⁵ *straining forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the goal* (Philippians 3:13-14). He hopes that our lives, like his, will be transformed by *knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection* (Philippians 3:10). Paul wants *to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.* (Philippians 3:10).

That's a funny maneuver on Paul's part. He urges us to know the power of Jesus' resurrection first, then share in his sufferings. Which is backward from how we normally tell the story. But it makes sense when you think about it.⁶ The resurrection of Christ is the guarantee that this life is worth living and that our physical body is sacred; it is the guarantee that death is not the end of life and that there is a world beyond; it is the guarantee that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of Christ.⁷

Value that, urges Paul, really and truly know how the knowledge of the resurrection transforms your life, and the inevitable suffering you encounter in this world will be transformative too. Get rid of the idea that what we do brings us closer to God. It's not our circumcision, or the tribe we belong to or how fluent our Hebrew is⁸, how zealously we follow the Law. None of that makes

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Fifth Sunday in Lent, Homiletical Perspective, Philippians 3:4b-14" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 137..

⁴ Taylor, 137.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*. [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975], 66.

⁶ Ernest F. Scott, "The Epistle to the Philippians: Exegesis," vol. 11 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 85.

⁷ Barclay, 64.

⁸ Barclay, 60

us holy. It's who we belong to.⁹ We don't do holy things, but because we belong to Christ alone, we make holy what we do.¹⁰

Paul wants us turned around for the same reason that the Prophet Isaiah wanted us turned around, so we could see the new thing God was doing. Based on our past experience, we know you can't walk on the sea, but God has made a road there (Isaiah 43:16). Based on our past experience, we know there isn't a river in the desert. But God has put one there now (Isaiah 43:19). If we keep *remembering the former things, or considering the things of old* (Isaiah 43:18), we're never going to notice that God is doing a new thing (Isaiah 43:19). God is doing this new thing for God's chosen people. If we keep ourselves tied to the past, we're going to miss the reality that we've been chosen. Which would be a terrible thing to miss.

Paul is clear. Sufferings are coming. And they can spin us around and head us back to the past. Or we can keep facing forward because of the bone deep reality of the resurrection, the guarantees that the resurrection life offers us, that we matter, that our bodies matter, that this life is not all that there is, that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, not in this life, not in the next one, nothing. By knowing Christ, by realizing that Christ has made us his own, we can get through the suffering as Jesus did. We can get through the suffering in part because our past has brought us to this moment. For Paul, everything in his life which brought him to knowing Jesus, however well or poorly it served him before, was just fuel to get him to this point. Paul would go on to use everything he had learned, everything he had been, everything he was, to deepen his relationship with Jesus. For Paul, Jesus was his present and his future. Paul felt that he was leaving nothing of value behind in his past, given the enormous value of what was waiting for him, the *prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*. (Philippians 3:14). That was worth bragging about, at the top of his lungs, to everyone he met. No humility required.

⁹ Ellen L. Babinsky, "Philippians 3:7-15." *Interpretation* 49, no. 1 [1995]: 71.

¹⁰ Babinsky, 71.