“Breaking Free”
Philippians 3:2-16
A Sermon Delivered by
Chaplain Margaret E. Siemer
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Good morning! Let’s dive into the word this morning. We're taking a look at Philippians 3, a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the brand new Christian church at Philippi. If ever there was a reason to delve into the context of a particular passage, this is it.

In the verse prior to our lectionary passage this morning, Paul refers to the religious leaders in the Jewish faith as "dogs." Now I love dogs. I’m even thinking about getting a dog because I think would great ministry here at the yard. Can’t you just see me and my little dog? Mids come to my office for a bit of puppy therapy? But I suspect the way I use the word “dog” and the way Paul uses the word have very different connotations. His meaning…well, there's a modern word that is not appropriate to use, but you can use your imagination and figure it out.

So back to Philippians 3 - On face value, it is tempting for us to read this passage as anti-Semitic, which is disrespectful at best of the Jewish people. But that's not at all his intent. Paul was challenging those who were still stuck in the letter of the law.

Here's what was happening: those who came to faith in Christ out of the Jewish tradition had a hard time accepting those who came from another tradition, the Gentiles who frankly, didn't have to first jump through the hoops of a legalistic tradition. Specifically, Paul refers to male circumcision-by the way, there was never a better time to be a Jewish female, in my opinion! Male circumcision was a practice ordained by God to set apart his people. The Christian equivalent is baptism—a setting apart. And the Jewish converts were demanding that the Gentile Christians also set themselves apart through this tradition. Paul attacks this issue by telling the new converts to "Watch out for those dogs…those mutilators of the flesh."

I have to admit that the human side of me sympathizes with the new Christians from the Jewish tradition. If you were raised with this works mindset, it is difficult to wrap your mind around the fact that you had to do something that others are not required to do and all receive the same benefits.
It reminds me of conversations I've had with young children who are just beginning to understand that life is not fair. Sometimes we see that “deer in the headlights” look as we see the wheels turning in their little minds, trying to process this reality. How many times do we want to just throw up our hands and say, "but that's not fair!"

The Jews were saying the same thing: "We had to get circumcised and let me tell you, that was not a fun day; Why shouldn't they?" That is the context of this passage. In true Paul fashion, he meets the readers where they are. He recognizes that just telling them to get off their soapbox is not going to be effective, nor convince them of their need to be one body in Christ.

In the Chaplain Siemer version of the Bible, Paul says, "Listen, let me review my credentials with you. First, my ancestry which carries significant weight in the Jewish tradition is from one of the original tribes of Israel. I am the real deal. Second, I'm in good standing the community. I have been educated in the circle of the Pharisees, I speak educated Greek and I take my religious convictions seriously. Before you write me off, consider that I am one of you and according to the standards to which you subscribe, I am all that and a bag of chips."

Let’s pick up at verse 7:
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, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 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. (NIV)

Paul regards his past accomplishments as a loss. He refers to it as “garbage” which is misleading in the English language. The Greek word, ‘skybala,” refers to trash, but also excrement. We have a few vernacular words that can simultaneously mean both of these, none of which are appropriate in the pulpit. The best word description of his meaning is “dirty diaper.” Keeping this in mind, we see the kind of contempt he has for his past accolades.

And Paul intends for us to hold the same kind of contempt for our faith accomplishments. Whatever it is WE do to claim our identity in Christ is rubbish, it's (insert your own vernacular here). What Paul is saying is that the important thing is "knowing Christ Jesus my Lord and HIS righteousness."
There's a deceptive assumption about Christianity that reduces it to a code of moral behavior that can be easily attained. We have become so accustomed to the idea of religion as moralism that we almost forget how frustrating it can be to try and follow all the rules and regulations perfectly. What Paul is saying here is that the gospel is just the opposite of that. There is the righteousness we attain by trying and there is the righteousness we catch when we encounter the grace of God. From the outside, these two often look exactly alike, but their motivations are entirely different.

Self-made righteousness comes from adding up all your virtues and restraining selfishness, lust and other vices. What is wrong with self-made righteousness? Isn’t it good to keep eyes on our running tab? Well, here’s what happens when we rely on this - we adopt a type of goodness that suits us and our condition and our class, then like the Pharisees –those dogs, we begin looking for a place to stop. Who exactly are our neighbors? How many times should we forgive? We draw a circle and leave out those whom we would like to forget. Because our self-loving ego tends to invent its own standard of goodness by which we condemn all others to inferiority.

Let’s take a look at Paul again. Some of you already know about his background. Remember Paul was the zealous religious leader before he came to Christ. So zealous, in fact, that he killed Christians because he saw Christ followers as heretics. He was trying to be righteous and he discovered that a self-conscious effort led to self-centeredness and self-righteousness. Despite all he had going for him, he was at his wit's end until God got a hold of him and transformed his life.

Paul says that Jesus became so important to him that he willingly cast aside all other things, leaving the past completely behind so he could trust Christ and Christ alone. Keep in mind when he wrote these words, he was imprisoned for being a follower of Christ. That kind of righteousness, the kind that comes from God, demonstrates HIS power.

How do we make the jump from materialistic self-preservation to a place where all that is forgotten and replaced with victorious devotion? This is what Paul refers to as the mystery of the gospel. It is both simple and profound. But more importantly, it is attainable only through the grace of God, who accepts us where we are, just as we are.

All it takes is a complete surrender to and personal trust in Christ, not a trust in one's assets and achievements as a backup. 100% surrendered. Once we know that we cannot make anything human
absolutely right, we are in a position to see that our creator is forever ready to take us as we are and do something new with our life.

My friends, this is great news! First, Christ's love for us and the power of his resurrection levels the playing field. All who have a desire to be in relationship with The Lord can be. You don't have to be good enough, rich enough, powerful enough, a certain race, gender or whatever! In Christ, we realize that a new creation could occur within us before we even deserve it, if only we could put ourselves aside and commit our lives to him.

As Jesus reached out to Paul in a personal way on that Damascus road, Paul tells us as Christ's ambassadors to reach out to others, to share the good news. To serve as Christ serves. To love as Christ loves. To live as Christ lives. Christ is the one and only prize which has any significance for Paul...and for us.

Let us pray:
Almighty God, Create a clean heart in us, and renew faithful spirits within us.
Do not force us away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from us.
Restore the joy of your salvation to us, and provide us with spirits of willing obedience.
Then we will teach your ways to those who are rebellious, and sinners will return to you.
In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.
(Psalm 51)