

The Gift of Christ Himself

Philippians 3:4b-14

A sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2016.

What forms an identity? Family and place of origin are certainly foundational. Faith and its practice is influential. Where one goes to school is formative. Marriage, children and the profession to which we dedicate ourselves is also a part of our identity. How well we succeed in family life, schooling and career may determine much of our self-worth. However, there is a danger to looking back over one's life to construct an identity, if it does not have its basis in the gift of Christ himself and a yearning for greater intimacy with him. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). We must keep our *eyes-in-the-boat* - looking straight ahead. We must not wallow in past failures or boast in our success. Instead, we are to press-on toward the goal of Christ.

Dwelling on past accomplishments may result in complacency. I've known a number of Naval Academy graduates that have done poorly in the fleet. A diploma and commission from USNA may give you an initial advantage over your peers, but in short order, the performance of those from other commissioning sources may surpass the Naval Academy graduate if she or he becomes complacent. Pedigree does not ensure success. Forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, we press on toward the goal.

The Apostle Paul had an amazing pedigree, possessing both ascribed and acquired honor. Paul's ascribed honor came by birth – a Hebrew born of Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin (Phil 3:5). His acquired honor came as a Pharisee, known for his devotion to the Torah and his blamelessness in regards to righteousness under the law (Phil 3:5-6). All of this gave him bragging rights, yet he regards his pedigree as rubbish, garbage, dung, excrement (Greek - σκύβαλον; transliteration - skubalon). Paul did not dwell on past accomplishments. Forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, Paul pressed on toward the goal of Christ.

Dwelling on past failures can result in dejection and despondency. I was a chemistry major for one semester. My goal was to attend Bethesda's Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS) to become a doctor. Organic Chemistry was my nemesis and that five-hour failure still resides on my transcript, accompanied by the 1.72 semester that ruined my GPA, resulting in an invitation to an Academic Board and an early return from Christmas Leave. I felt humiliated. I was devastated. I had lost confidence in myself. I had to visit the Dean and change majors. I gave up my dream of becoming a doctor. It still hurts to tell the story. I spent hours reflecting on the Midshipman's Prayer – "if I should miss the mark, give me courage to try again." With God's help, I was able to forget what lay behind. Straining forward to what lay ahead, I pressed on toward the goal.

In his zeal, the Apostle Paul had been a persecutor of the fledgling church (Phil 3:6). He approved of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58; Acts 8:1). Paul ravaged the church in Jerusalem, committing many to prison (Acts 8:3). Before his conversion, Paul received authorization from the High Priest to take Christians prisoner in Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2) for prosecution. Following his conversion (on the road to Damascus) Paul could have wallowed in his guilt, burdened by Jesus' question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). Instead, forgetting what lay behind, straining forward to what lay ahead, Paul pressed on toward the goal of Christ. His identity was transformed from boastful Pharisee and persecutor of those outside the law, to champion of Christ and missionary to young congregations .

Paul speaks of his radical change of identity in the context of Judaizers meddling in the congregation at Philippi. Well-meaning folks wanted the Phillipians to adhere to the law of Moses. Paul warns them regarding the mutilators (Greek – κατατομή; transliteration – Katatome) in their midst:

²Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! ³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh...(Phil 3:2-4a)

Paul is telling the Phillipians, "Place no self-reliance in outward signs and adherence to the law. Instead, know that your hearts have been circumcised in Christ." Paul goes on to encourage the Phillipians to celebrate the gift of Christ himself and seek greater intimacy with him. Forgetting what lies

behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, Paul inspires the Philippians to press on toward the goal of Christ.

Family and place of origin, schooling, marriage, children and the profession to which we dedicate ourselves – these are a portion of our identity. How well we succeed in family life, schooling and career impacts our self-worth, but does not define us. Looking back over one's life is dangerous, with the potential to wallow in past failures or boast in our success. Celebrating the gift of Christ himself and yearning for greater intimacy with him, gives us our true identity. Keeping our *eyes-in-the-boat*, forgetting what lies behind, straining forward toward the fullness that lies ahead, let us be inspired to press on toward the goal of Christ. Amen.