

## **That I May Gain Christ Philippians 3:4b-14**

### **Intro**

When Juhee and I first came to the United States, we brought 5 bags of luggage. As time went on, the 5 bags of luggage turned into a packed 17-foot moving truck when we moved to Rhode Island. Whenever I have packed my stuff for moving, I throw many things away. But, strangely, the number of moving boxes always increases and never goes down. Have you ever had a similar experience?

We tend to throw away useless and broken things but generally not good things. In fact, we keep them safe because in our capitalist society, what we have is often regarded as an indicator of what we have achieved. A large house, cars, boat, vacation house, antique furniture and many other good things... they are the trophies we have won and we are proud of the results of our hard-work.

We also like to collect and keep different kinds of trophies such as titles and credentials. A credential is particularly important in our society. A credential is regarded as evidence of one's ability to practice a certain profession with a certain degree of excellency. To gain admissions to a college, an academic credential in high school is required. To become a medical doctor or a lawyer, one must earn related academic degrees and pass the bar examination. Even to be an ordained pastor, one must acquire a necessary degree and pass all the required ordination process.

I don't know if anyone can really master God in three years, but upon graduation from seminary, a pastor earns a professional degree called, the Master of Divinity. Perhaps you don't really care whether your pastor has all these necessary credentials from an accredited seminary or university. But you would certainly want your cardiac surgeon have all the necessary credentials and licenses. Right?

Since a credential represents one's ability, proficiency and achievement, credentials give certain authority, status and privilege to those who have them. We are proud of what we have achieved and enjoy the privileges that come from our achievements. It is not easy to throw away these valuable credentials. In fact, only a fool would throw away what is valuable.

### **1<sup>st</sup> movement Is Paul Bragging?**

In today's scripture, Paul started by bragging about his impressive credentials. He said, "You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book." In Philippians chapter 2, Paul tells the people to imitate Christ's humility but why is Paul bragging now?

Like in the United Methodist's itinerant system, Paul moved place to place. After establishing a church at Philippi, Paul moved on to other cities. When Paul left the church, Jewish Christians from Jerusalem came to Philippi and told the Gentile Christians to keep Jewish laws in order to be right Christians. Jewish Christians bragged of their circumcision as a sign of being the holy people. They valued their Jewish laws and heritages and they were proud of them. But they used them as their credentials, claiming their religions and moral superiority over Gentile Christians and thus, leading them in a wrong direction.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Movement As we brag**

Like the Jewish Christians, we often make the same mistakes, attempting to establish our credentials with our possessions and achievements. I did too. When I first came to the United States, I began to work as an intern pastor in a large Korean church in Atlanta. Soon after I started working, the senior pastor asked three intern pastors to preach for one of the adult worship services during his absence. Three of the intern pastors including me were males, and we had only worked for the church for about a month. One of the female staff, who was a third year Master of Divinity student and also in charge of the children's ministry, argued that this was unfair to the female staff because she had never had a chance to preach for the adult congregation. She thought it was a gender issue. The senior pastor answered that he wanted preachers in his church to have had graduated from an M. Div. program at minimum. Two of the intern pastors were ordained and one was in the master of theology program after receiving M. Div. degree. However, she did not agree with him. (Pause)

I am not saying whether or not it was gender issue but I will tell you how I felt at that time. I felt she was hypersensitive about this issue. Although I did not say anything, I was very uncomfortable and thought "how dare she want to be in line with ordained pastors". (It is a little bit embarrassing now to admit this, but I thought like this.) I have studied theology for more than 6 years and completed the ordination process over 4 years ago. I have served the church as a senior pastor for 4 years, and preached every Wednesday and Sunday. Honestly, I did not like what she said because I felt that she disturbed my right and my hard work and achievement. At that time, I attempted to find my credentials as a preacher not in Christ, but in what I had achieved. I sought some sort of upward mobility based on my credentials as an ordained pastor. By doing this, I was led astray from God while I was serving God.

If we try to establish our credentials as faithful Christians, based on how long we have attended church, how much we have contributed to the church, how often we have helped the church, or whatever we have achieved or inherited... it is a sign that we are losing our way to Christ. Age is no measure of spiritual maturity. Ordination is not a certificate of spiritual perfection. Having the title, "bishop. Rev. Dr." doesn't mean that that person knows all the answers to our spiritual questions. The size of the church building, the numbers of members, the size of our annual budget cannot be equated with faithfulness of the church. But how often have we lost our heart to these things? How often have we bragged while we were serving God?

## **3<sup>rd</sup> Movement That I may gain Christ: Moving to the margin**

While Paul has all of these incredible credentials, he said, "The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him."

Paul knew that the way to know and embrace Jesus Christ was not moving-upward but downward just like Jesus Christ did. Jesus came from the presence of God, from throne, from the glory to the earth, to humiliation and to death on the cross. Jesus Christ emptied himself so he could embrace us. I know our church has many huggers. What do you need to do to hug or embrace other people? You first need to go to the person you would hug and you need to open your arms and create a space in you. In other words, you first need to empty yourself to embrace

others. If you want to embrace Christ, you first need to go to where Christ is. Where is Christ in our society today? Where would Jesus Christ go first if Jesus came back today? To the National prayer breakfast at White House? To Mega churches in the Southern Bible belt? To a Party at a Newport mansion? Or perhaps, Fenway Park? Maybe not.

Where would Jesus go? Throughout the Bible, there is a theological trend called, The “preferential option for the poor.” It is God’s preference being given to the well being of the poor and the vulnerable of society. Jesus’ ministry reflected this preferential option for the poor. We may not exactly know where he would go but we can guess where he would go. Jesus would go to the street and meet people who live there. He would visit people in nursing homes, homeless shelters, food banks, hospice and hospitals. He would go to Alcoholic Anonymous meetings and talk and laugh with them. He would go to farms where he would meet migrant workers, both documented and undocumented, who labored all day for low wages. He would go to the border wall Migrant Detention Center where people suffer from dangerous overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. In this pandemic situation, Jesus wouldn’t mind babysitting a few hours for parents who are raising their children and doing their fulltime work at home. Where else he would go?

To know and embrace Christ, we need to go to these places. Instead of looking for the center, we need to be willing to toss away the titles, credentials, privileges, and status we have enjoyed, and go to the margins and be friends with the poor and the vulnerable. Instead of merely enjoying and being satisfied with what we have achieved, we need to throw away good things for the sake of others and empty ourselves just like Jesus Christ did for us.

It’s hard to toss away good things for others and move to the margin. We have our own families and many other important things to take care of. We have so many things in our hands and we are afraid of let them go because they seemed to provide the basis of our security, comfort and happiness. But without emptying ourselves, we may not be able to know Christ and the power of his resurrection from death. It’s like breathing. To inhale fresh air, what do you need to do first? You need to exhale. Without emptying your lungs, you cannot inhale. If a person only inhales, what would happen to that person? He would die. Emptying ourselves sounds scary but it is the way of life. It is in the act of exhaling that inhaling the breath of life is made possible. It is a way to know and embrace Christ and be embraced by him.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Churches in the world are celebrating Holy Communion. By partaking in Communion, we eat the body of Christ and drink the blood of Christ given for us. Christ emptied himself for us and wholly gave himself to us. By eating his body, we become one with Christ. By drinking his blood, we become his body to be given to others. My friends, remember Christ’s love for us. Partake of his bread and wine and it will give us courage and strength to empty and give ourselves for others. In doing so, we may gain Christ. With grateful hearts, come to the Lord’s table.