



**“EVEN SO, WE PRESS ON”**  
**SCRIPTURE: PHILIPPIANS 3: 4b-14**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**Sunday, October 8, 2023**

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Philippians 3:4b-14**

3:4b If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:

3:5 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;

3:6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

3:7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

3:8 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

3:9 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.

3:10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,

3:11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

3:12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

3:13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,

3:14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

The Word of the LORD

**Thanks be to God.**

## October (3 Slides)

These requests for official recognition, for our country, our world to reframe, to wake up, to lean in—the need for these months, weeks, and days rests in the tyranny of conquest and erasure, the whitewashing of history and bodies and actual human life.

Where do you find yourself in these months, weeks, and days? Where do we find ourselves as the human family? Where are we as a community, Grace Covenant?

Paul found himself in times fraught with Empire's capacity to erase, silence, and push to the margins. He spoke into a withering reality with an enthusiasm for not giving up, for not shying away from the suffering, from the injustices, from the pain.

For Paul shying away from the hard things is the same thing as forsaking the beautiful things, the blessings, the promises of God.

Paul's not talking about giving up chocolate for Lent, he's talking about a whole reframing of the way he understands the universe and his place in it. It's not the things that don't matter to Paul that he loses, it's the things that do matter to him that become loss and that loss is gain.

Christ's suffering gives us another way to interpret our own suffering

What is the "prize" we are pressing on for?

For Paul, the prize is Jesus centered—and it is not just on Jesus' death, but also on Jesus' life. Jesus, the fellow sufferer who understands. Jesus, the wise companion on life's way. Jesus, the sibling who never leaves our side. Jesus, the brave provoker of justice. Jesus, the tender healer of our wounds.

For Paul the call to faith is a call to ministry. When we follow Jesus, we are all ministers—and we are all ministering in his name. We reorient to the world and to our role in the world. We leave things behind not by not remembering that they happened, but by ceasing to keep score.

Paul wrote letters to communities most of the time, not to individuals. To collectives held in the constrictions of culture and systems of power. He wrote to collectives who can easily get tangled and twisted in how to live together. Paul longed for right relationship. And he knew that Jesus was the key to finally getting there—with God, with each other, with self.

Paul had to let go of his allegiance to superiority, to being proud, boastful about his virtue, his piety. That is how he gained his humanity.

Losing white supremacy, losing our allegiance to whiteness, is gaining our humanity.

Whiteness is not about melanin in the skin. It is a chosen host to cover the quest for wealth, accumulation and power.

White people sold out to it. White people have been bamboozled into the lie of superiority.

And the walk of faith is a journey in which we're not afraid to lay down the idols of the things that we've told ourselves we can't live without, the things that we've told ourselves matter more than anything else.

Those are the things that Paul learned he could lay down and for him it was around piety and pride.

For you, it might be something else. It might be around virtue. It might be around self-loathing. It might be around being needed. It might be around telling yourself you are independent.

Whatever it is that you need to lay down to follow Jesus, you deserve acknowledgment. You deserve a space to say here I am, and here's how I struggle and here's what freedom could look like for me.

Can we trust each other with that level of vulnerability?

Paul had such a query for the Philippians: Can we trust each other with the weight, the magnitude of the losses that will become gains? Can we trust each other enough to take a chance together on this new life that we're called toward?

Paul is pretty ambiguous about what this all means, in terms of being raised to Christ, in terms of Resurrection, but it seems to be something worth living for and worth dying for and it seems to be a place of freedom from all the things that have weighed him down and told him that he is in charge of his status in God's eyes. It seems to be the place where there is blessed assurance that he and all of us are held in divinity's embrace.

Paul is calling us to a life of growth, change, and perseverance—this language of pressing on. That's going to mean something different for each one of us. What are you having to press on through—we have to learn the difference between a good stretch and the breaking point.

Only you know that for yourself. But the good news is that Christ is present to us with a deep understanding in all of our idiosyncrasies. That's the promise that Paul is referring to when he says I am willing to do anything to stay on this path. To follow a God who understands our frailties and our possibilities.

So that's where we are in this place of pressing on. And because it is idiosyncratic there can be a loneliness to it. So sometimes you may feel lonely here. Like everyone else gets it but you don't. Or you don't know where you fit in here. Or you may feel like you don't know how to be in this church anymore. Or you may be new and not know who to trust.

Paul tells us the life of faith may feel lonely sometimes, but we are never alone. It's that accompaniment that frees us up to be true community. There's such humility in that. We need each other. But we're not all the same. It's a beautiful place and a place where there is no white-washing. There's technicolor. There's brightness, there's depth, there's uniqueness, there's reality. There's textures. There's sorrow and celebration. This the life that we are pressing toward, this is the life we are called to believe will teach us again what it is to lose and to gain.

I pray that wherever it is you need acknowledgment, that your siblings in Christ here at Grace Covenant can meet you there. And see you for the beautiful witness you are to God's creativity and Holy Imagination.

Thanks be to God.