

I Want to Know Christ

Philippians 3:1-14

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This morning's passage of scripture from Philippians 3 has an image that is not to be taken lightly or ignored. It is the image of a man, a human being, whose life is filled with purpose and with passion. He has a goal. It is a goal big enough to consume his every desire. To reach that goal, or to move toward that goal, he says he presses on to win the prize of that goal. What type of a goal, what type of a prize, would lead someone to say this is my purpose, this is my passion, this is my lifelong pursuit? What prize could be so great that a person would say, "I press on toward the goal, to win the prize"? The man who is writing this is the Apostle Paul. The goal, the purpose, the prize to which he presses on is simply this, "To know Jesus Christ."

The people who assign the passages in the lectionary, which we use to guide our worship, the passages of scripture that make up the church year, they do good work. But I am absolutely certain when they planned the lectionary for October 8, 2017, I am absolutely certain they had no idea that in the days leading up to October 8, 2017 there would be hurricanes and earthquakes and nuclear threats that would cause us to question and doubt the direction this world is headed. I am absolutely certain they did not know that from a hotel room in Las Vegas a man whose evil motives make no sense to anyone would shoot randomly down on a crowd of 22,000. And of course they did not know a precious young woman would collapse and die in the prime of life. When enough of these things happen discouragement and despair creep in. When there is enough chaos and confusion we cry out, "What is the meaning? What is the purpose? What is the plan?" It would be asking a lot of those who compile the passages of scripture that guide the Christian church through the liturgical calendar to anticipate all of this, to have a passage prepared for us so that on Sunday, October 8, 2017, the passage of scripture could speak a word that says life can have a meaning and purpose so clear and compelling that you can spend yourself completely in pursuit of that goal, of that purpose, of that prize.

And yet here we are, on Sunday, October 8, 2017, in the midst of a time of chaos and suffering and loss and in the shadow of an act of evil that took the life of 58 people, and there is a passage before us, on this very day, that says for at least one man he has found his passion and purpose in life, and at least for him, it is such a powerful and compelling passion and purpose that he is spending his every moment, his every day, in pursuit of that goal, in pursuit of that prize. The prize is to know Jesus Christ.

There is something of particular interest as the Apostle Paul describes his desire to know Christ, to know Christ in such a way that his life is consumed with pressing on toward the goal to win this precious prize. Many times people turn to Christ in times of despair, in times of failure, in times of crisis, in times of sadness and suffering. The Prodigal returns when his life has hit bottom. The leper and the lame have nowhere else to turn. Jesus offered the invitation, “Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden.” Someone described the ministry of Jesus by saying he came for the least, the last, and the lost. When I came to Christ that is a pretty accurate description of where my life was. That is certainly part of the good news, that we can come when we are broken, hopeless, helpless, lonely, and lost.

But here in Philippians 3 Paul does not describe himself as being broken, helpless, lonely, lost, or even seeking something. Paul has it all together. He has it all figured out. He has life wired. He is at the top of his game. In terms of the life he was trying to put together, the pieces fit perfectly. That is what he describes in verses five and six. He had the outward sign of circumcision that was so essential in the Jewish faith, he had the right pedigree, he had the right practices...following the law, religious zeal, and a righteousness that was faultless. So when Paul describes what happens in his life when he comes to know Jesus Christ, he is not coming to Christ from a point of weakness, failure, or desperation. He had it all. And yet when he met Christ, he realized in an instant that everything he had meant nothing in comparison to knowing Jesus Christ.

Isn't that the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ? When we truly come to understand who Jesus is, he changes the way we look at every single thing in life. Our priorities are dramatically changed. The parable that Jesus told becomes true. We find him and realize he is the pearl of great price. He is the treasure hidden in the field. Nothing else compares to him, and so we follow him wholeheartedly, which means with all our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength. Paul had it all, and then when he met Jesus he realized it was all nothing, it was worthless, it was rubbish...compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ.

Right now we have bible study groups meeting on Tuesday and Wednesday, and both are overviews of the whole bible, Genesis to Revelation. That is extremely important, because the claim of Jesus is that he is the fulfillment of all that God promised in the pages of the Old Testament. To know Christ is to know the whole story. And yet I find that even as I make an effort to pay attention to the whole story, I can't get by without returning again and again to the specific story of the life of Jesus Christ. One friend described it in this way. “I have to keep one foot in the gospels.” I like that. I want to know Christ in the context of the whole bible. And I want to know Christ in the context of the stories revealed in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Jesus we meet in scripture is worthy of our whole

devotion. His preaching and teaching are life giving. His touch and his tenderness bring healing and wholeness. His passion for justice and righteousness, his concern for the poor, the alien, the outcast, the prisoner, is a passion that promises a future where the kingdom of God will one day reign in all of its glory, and with the promised peace that passes all understanding. And then there is the passion that is only his, the passion of his suffering, the passion that proves the depth of his love, of God's love, for a broken world. Paul wanted to know all of this in a profoundly personal way. For this Jesus who emptied himself and became obedient to death on a cross is the one God raised from the dead, victorious over sin, victorious over evil, victorious over the devil and all his dominion, and victorious over death. In him is life, and that life is the light of all people.

In the search for purpose in life, in the search for meaning in a world that has so much confusion and chaos, I can't think of anything else at all, that in any way, shape, or form, compares to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ. No, I do not think those who compiled the verses of the lectionary had any inkling of the events that would be swirling around us in ways that feel so out of control when they gave us this verse for Sunday, October 8, 2017. But I think God did. And I think we could have read these verses in the midst of the brutal battles in Europe that marked the first great war, or as the forces of fascism advanced in the second great war, or in the heroic struggles with Civil Rights in the 1960s, and even on that frightening day in September of 2001 and the promise and the power of these verses would be just as clear, just as compelling, and I would hope just as convicting. Because if we are looking for purpose and meaning and passion anywhere other than in Jesus Christ, we just won't find it. Our only way forward is to say with Paul, "I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering."

As I have spent time this week reflecting on how timeless the words of Paul are, I began thinking about specific times when his words about knowing Christ were demonstrated with dramatic effect. I have been thinking about specific times when by the grace of God the examples of people seeking and searching for meaning and purpose in life have found it in knowing Jesus Christ. In the spring of 2007 I took of group of Presbyterians to Scotland, which is the birthplace of Presbyterianism. We will get a chance to celebrate our roots on Sunday, October 29th, with the Kirkin 'O the Tartans on Reformation Sunday. Last year some wore kilts and brought symbols of our heritage. Last year was a great day and I believe this year will be even better. Anyway, back in 2007 I took a group of Presbyterians on a tour of Scotland. That trip was one in which the beauty of knowing Christ was evident in numerous ways.

One of our first stops was at the childhood home of David Livingstone. It was a quiet day. We were greeted by an older man who led us a tour. Livingstone was born in a single-roomed tenement in a larger, whitewashed building. From his humble beginnings Livingstone went on to become Scotland's greatest explorer, going to Africa as a missionary. There he led thousands of people to Christ. In Glasgow Livingstone had received his medical doctorate and a degree in theology. He went to Africa as an explorer, looking for the headwaters of the Nile River. He went as a civil rights leader, fighting the slave trade. He went as a missionary and an evangelist, taking Jesus to the people, faithful through his years. Our guide finished his speech by telling us in 1873, David Livingstone died. His last diary entry stated: "My Jesus, my King, my life, my all. I dedicate my whole life to thee." It was really not much of a tour, and not much of an exhibit. It was pretty plain and pretty simple. But I will never forget the guide. As he told us the last lines of the last journal entry of this great explorer, our guide had tears in his eyes. "My Jesus, my King, my life, my all. I dedicate my whole life to thee." We weren't on a historical tour. We were on a spiritual journey, and we had just been in the presence of one whose burning desire was to know Christ.

In Edinburgh we visited the home of John Knox. John Knox laid the groundwork for what we know as the Presbyterian Church. One of his most well-known quotes says, "Give me Scotland or I die." His passion to know Christ and to make Christ known is an inspiring witness. Knox served at the St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. On a cold Saturday afternoon, I was walking down what is called the Royal Mile, the ancient street which passes by St. Giles Cathedral. A man was standing outside the cathedral with a sign. The sign said, "John 3:16." After he set up the sign, he plugged in a small amplifier. Then he took a microphone, and began to talk, right there on the street corner. He stood out like a sore thumb.

I watched with curiosity as he began to talk. Unlike some street preachers who rant and rave, ones who focus on judgment and condemnation, this man simply began to speak in a quiet and calm voice about the love of God. Folks would look at him as they walked by, read the sign, and keep moving. Many shook their heads. Others awkwardly avoided any eye contact. More than a few laughed as they walked on. But one man heard him and stopped. One man sat down about fifteen feet away from him and listened. As this man listened, he bowed his head and began to pray. That man was me.

I prayed that these words of love would not be ridiculed, would not be laughed at, and most importantly, would not be ignored. I prayed that these words of love would find a home in people's heart. As he patiently shared the good news about Jesus to all who passed by, I thought of how the Apostle Paul said that in so many ways, we are fools for Christ. We preach a message that can sound strange, outdated, and irrelevant. We stand on street corners in busy and modern cities and

tell a story about a Jewish man who lived 2,000 years ago. And he wasn't a king. He wasn't powerful. He wasn't rich. When he finally died it was a humiliating death. Stand on a street corner and share that message and you can begin to feel like a fool. Except for one thing. Except for this one thing. Jesus Christ was God's beloved Son, and by the time God raised him from the dead and exalted him to the highest place in heaven, we realize he was the King of kings and the Lord of lords; we realize he has all power and authority on heaven and on earth; we realize all the riches belong to him; and although his death was humiliating, he is now worshiped with the deepest reverence and the most cherished devotion. So even though the world might say we are fools for Christ, we say our greatest desire in life, our highest purpose, our fervent passion is to know Christ. We just want to know Christ.

While I was in Scotland, and while I was thinking about people who had followed Christ and served Christ and sacrificed for Christ, all because they wanted to know Christ, I came across an article. The timing of the article couldn't have been more perfect, especially as I thought of that lonely figure outside St. Giles Cathedral, holding a sign that said *John 3:16*, and quietly and patiently telling others about the love of God. The article was by Richard Mouw, who at the time was President of Fuller Seminary, the large, non-denominational seminary in Pasadena, California.

In the article, Richard Mouw tells about giving an address at a conference focused on *the Abrahamic religions*. His message to the conference concluded by reflecting on two aspects of his own faith.

The first involved an encounter I had recently witnessed between a Jew and a Muslim. About thirty or so American religious leaders representing Christianity, Judaism, and Islam had the privilege of a closed-door session with King Abdullah of Jordan on one of his visits to the United States. We were impressed by the Arab leader's professed commitment to encouraging fellow Muslims to cooperate with Jews and Christians in countering the toxic influence of extremists in each of our communities. His responses to probing questions were equally impressive-indeed, they were often quite inspiring.

As our session neared its conclusion, an elderly rabbi asked for a final word. He told the king that he was deeply moved by what he had shared. "We need you in our world of turmoil today, but I worry about your safety and the safety and well-being of your family." He pledged to pray for King Abdullah and his loved ones. And then the rabbi offered, as a fellow descendent of Abraham, the well-known ancient blessing. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

I told my audience how moved I was by that encounter. As an evangelical Christian, I said, I believe with all my heart that the God I worship, the God of Abraham, looked down on that scene and smiled.

But then I quickly moved to the second aspect that I needed to share. “Those of you who watch professional football games know that there is often somebody in the crowd right behind the goalposts who holds up a John 3:16 sign. I need to tell you this: That’s me!” I find I need to live with some mystery about what God is doing in the Abrahamic religions. At the same time, I cannot fail to proclaim the John 3:16 message that God has sent a Savior, and that those who believe on him will not perish but have everlasting life.¹

Perhaps now more than ever we need Christians who will respect and honor and learn from and pray for those of different religions. We need bridge builders. We need peacemakers. We need Christians who practice forbearance and kindness and who build partnerships and relationships with those who believe differently than us. And yet the second part of what Dr. Mouw said is equally important. Now more than ever we need followers of Jesus Christ who hold up that crazy sign that says John 3:16. And we need Christians who not only hold up a sign about John 3:16, we need Christians who live out that love in this world. We need Christians whose burning desire is to say what Paul said 2,000 years ago, “I want to know Christ.” To know Christ is to live for him and through him and in him as his love shapes and molds and transforms our lives into his image. So I finished reading Richard Mouw’s article and I thought about John Knox and Dr. Livingstone and a lonely figure holding a sign outside St. Giles Cathedral and I realized that even though I haven’t obtained it and haven’t reached the goal, I want to know Christ. I want to pour my life out in pursuit of knowing him better and better, in ways that are deeper and deeper, with a heart that is purer and purer. That guy with the wig and the sign that says John 3:16, that’s me. That’s me.

When we want to know Christ, it is not unusual that we want our loved ones to know Christ. A group from our former church was on a retreat. During the retreat a woman named Susan asked for prayers for her husband Trevor. She told how Trevor was not a believer, how his scientific mind played a role in keeping him from believing, and how she longed for him to know the love of Jesus Christ and to believe in God in a personal and intimate way. She said, “He told me he is going to church tomorrow while we are away on retreat. I pray God touches his heart.” The group gathered and prayed.

¹ Richard Mouw, *Christianity Today*, April 2008, 47.

Trevor showed up for worship that Sunday while the group was away on retreat. I was glad to see Trevor, knowing full well his wife had said he did not Christ. I greeted him as he came in and we then moved into the worship service. That particular Sunday I was preaching from Mark 8, and the passage included two stories. One was about Jesus feeding 4,000 people with just seven loaves and few small fish. This feeding happened after Jesus had fed 5,000 people in Mark chapter 6. After Jesus fed the 4,000, which was after Jesus fed the 5,000, the disciples get worried because they are in a boat with Jesus and they only have one loaf between the twelve of them. They are worried about having enough bread when Jesus has just fed 5,000 and 4,000 with just a few loaves. Jesus throws up his hands and says, "Do you still not understand?"

Well that morning, as I preached through that particular passage, I kept using the phrase, "Do you get it?" Do we get it, that God loves us and God will provide for us and that to go even a bit further with the image Jesus is in the boat with us, Jesus is in the boat with us, Jesus, God's Beloved Son is with us, with us, Immanuel, God is with us...do you get it, do we get it? I guess I got going a bit that morning, because this stuff really matters. That would have been a good morning to wear my wig. I guess I asked the question quite a few times that day, because that questions really matters. Do you get it?

After the service I had calmed down when Trevor came walking out the door. I had forgotten about Trevor in my excitement, I had forgotten about the group that was away on retreat. I had forgotten the prayers Susan and the group were praying for Trevor. Trevor came out the door at the end of worship with a big smile on his face. I shook his hand and started moving toward the next person. But Trevor held on to my hand for an extra moment. His face was beaming. He looked me in the eye and said, "I get it." It took me a second. Actually it took me more than that. I didn't get it at that point. He said, "You asked this morning if we get it, and I get it. I get it." We live for moments like that. In the grace and mystery of God, Trevor had come to know Christ.

That was in February of 2002. Not long after that Trevor and Susan moved back to their home country of Australia. A few years later I received an email from Susan, Trevor's wife. This is what it said:

Hi, Wayne:

Trevor has terminal cancer. The doctors think he only has months to live. I am putting together a testimony of Trevor's walk with the Lord, and wondered whether you would have a copy of the sermon you preached on Sunday, 24 February 2002. It was titled "Do you get it?"

I found the sermon and sent it to her. She wrote back:

Hi, Wayne:

Thank you so much for locating and sending the sermon. It brought back so many wonderful memories of that wonderful weekend retreat. As a result of answered prayers that we prayed that weekend, Trevor has not been the same.... he was forever ruined for the ordinary.

Although Trevor's health is failing, his faith grows stronger day by day. I was reading your sermon again and reflecting on how God has provided during Trev's illness. Every time Trev had to visit the chemo ward for treatment we would pray that God would bring people to us that needed the love and encouragement of God in their life at that particular time. Every time God was faithful to provide. People still come and visit Trevor at our home, and it's such a joy to see people growing in their faith as they observe Trevor going through this illness and having no doubts or fears about his future.

We feel God's presence with us, and know we are not alone in this season. Please pass on our love to our wonderful church family.

*Love and blessings,
Susan and Trevor*

For just that one moment when you hear a person say, "I get it", I would gladly wear a crazy wig. For a wife to see her husband come to faith when his whole life had been full of doubt, I would gladly wear a crazy wig. To know that husband and wife spent their rest of their days in passionate pursuit of knowing Christ, I would gladly wear a crazy wig. In a season of doubt, in a time of despair, I would gladly wear a wig and say there is a way that brings meaning and purpose to life. It comes through knowing Jesus Christ. And with Paul we say, "It's not that we have obtained all this or have already arrived at the goal"...no, no, we haven't even scratched the surface of knowing him. "Not that we have already obtained all this or have already arrived at the goal, but one thing we do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, we press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus." Why do we do this? Because we want to know Jesus Christ. There is no greater prize, no greater goal, no greater purpose, and no greater passion, than knowing Jesus Christ. So for Christ, and Christ alone, I would gladly wear a crazy wig.