

"Confidence in the Flesh"
Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday in Kingdomtide
Lectionary Year A
October 2, 2011
Text: Philippians 3:4b-14
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Today is a special day in the life not only of this congregation, but in the life of congregations all over the world. It is World Communion Sunday. Christianity, as you know, *is* a world religion. There are Christians, those who serve Jesus as their Savior and Lord, living everywhere we can think of. And those Christians worship on a regular basis, and often when they do they celebrate Holy Communion. When you think about it, communion and baptism, though understood and presented somewhat differently in the various Christian denominations, are the two things all churches everywhere practice. That's an amazing reality. Despite significant differences in race, culture, politics, economics, language, and even theology, Christians everywhere baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and receive the bread and the cup in remembrance of Christ.

Why is that possible? What binds us together and bridges whatever it is that might divide us as sisters and brothers in Christ? What crosses the barriers we tend to erect or that simply exist naturally so that at least on the occasions when we are engaged in

these two sacraments or ordinances we see ourselves in solidarity with one another? What makes us one as the Church universal in those moments?

I believe these are important and meaningful questions, and I further feel that at least a part of the answer is given to us in our passage of scripture for this morning from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. The apostle describes the change in his life, particularly how he views himself, in the aftermath of his dramatic experience of the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. Paul refers to that experience several times and in different ways throughout his letters. The experience turned his life around completely, and he was never the same after it. It was a total transformation for him.

As a result of his coming to know Christ as his Savior and Lord, how does Paul see all of his accomplishments, as seemingly significant as they are? Rubbish. Trash. Refuse. Waste. My friend Eric Folkerth called me some time back on his cell phone while driving in his car. That is usually when we talk. As we were visiting, he changed the subject of our conversation to note that he was following a city sanitation truck that had been left open so that the garbage it had collected that morning was being indiscriminately strewn all over the road. There was stuff scattered everywhere. That's an image worth

keeping in mind when we, like Paul, evaluate our lives and what we see as our achievements in the light of our faith in Christ.

What Paul had accomplished as a Pharisee was a status marker or status symbol for him in his world. His religious achievements set him apart and made him feel superior to others who had not attained what he had in terms of faithfulness to the Jewish Law. We have our own status markers: the houses we live in, the cars we drive, the colleges or universities we attended, the degrees we earned, the occupations we have, the clubs or organizations to which we belong, the private schools to which we send our kids, the restaurants we frequent, the concerts or plays we attend, the vacations we take. All of these are status markers, setting us apart from others and allowing us the chance to feel privileged and successful and important.

As was true for Paul, we often are tempted to put our confidence in these things. In subtle and not so subtle ways we brag and boast about them, and more problematic and even self-destructive, we see those things as defining us, giving us our sense of identity, and making us who we are. Yet such should not be the case for us who follow Christ. That is not where our primary focus should be. The hymn writer Isaac Watts is entirely correct when he states in the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,"

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,

Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

To know Christ should be the only real status marker in our lives.

Imagine this: Let's say you are at a social gathering of some kind. It could be an office party, an artistic performance, the opening of a new business or agency or organization. In such a setting, if someone came up to you and said, "What do you do for a living?" What would you instinctively and automatically say? "I'm an accountant or I am teacher or I am a nurse or I am a physician or I am a banker or I am a lawyer or I am a contractor."

What would it be like if at that social gathering at which you were asked that question, you responded with, "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. That's what I do for a living. By following him—what he did and what he taught—I am seeking to be like him. That's the focus of my life, what gives my life meaning and purpose. I also have a job that provides the income necessary to meet my needs and that of my family." I think Paul might have seen his life in that way and might encourage us to as well.

What makes World Communion Sunday possible is Jesus himself, of course. There would be no Christian Church worshipping today were it not for his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We, along with

Christians around the world are celebrating communion today primarily because of his actions, but also, at least in part, by our attitude, if we have the right one, the one suggested by Paul in our scripture lesson for today. If we understand that all of the things we have achieved and all the things we have accumulated in life are really quite worthless compared to what we have in Christ, it allows us to see Christians everywhere as being essentially the same.

And that changes everything, at least for the brief time we spend at the table today, receiving the means of grace. In that moment, with that act of sharing the body and blood of Christ, all differences between us and our brothers and sisters in Christ from around the world simply disappear, as if they don't exist. The truth is that they don't. Not really. Not in Christ. At the table of Christ, sharing the common bread and the common cup, we are all sinners who have been saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ, and that is all, all, all that matters.

Of the number of communion hymns we sing, my favorite has this refrain, to be sung in unison, of course:

One bread, one body, one Lord of all,
 one cup of blessing which we bless.
And we, though many, throughout the earth,
 we are one body in this one Lord.

Think of the difference it would make in our world if we took this attitude from the table today and made every effort to put it into practice in all that we do in our lives. We might just find ourselves as radically transformed as did Paul.