

April 3 2022 Lent 5C  
Phil 3:4-14  
Making Church Fun Again

I grew up in the Bible Belt and attended a Southern Baptist High School. That sort of twisted my approach to God. At one point I almost came to feel that if something was fun, it must not be holy. This included dancing, playing cards, listening to any music other than "church music," and the list went on. In my high school, there was a real emphasis on being holy. And it appeared to me that you got to be holy by not doing the fun stuff. At some point, I began to question what it meant to be holy and how you got there, and could it possibly include stuff that was fun.

Another thing popular in my high school was religious "tracts"—little pamphlets that gave you the 3 step method of salvation, or the three step method of holiness or the 3 step method for overcoming sin and temptation. It was neat and tidy and sometimes even somewhat appealing.

If you read between the lines in our Philippians reading, it seems that there are some new popular preachers that are ready to answer these questions for the population of Philippi. They are preaching that the way to holy is the law, the ritual of circumcision, and easy-to-follow steps. They probably have a 3 step religious tract that lays it out for all the Philippians.

That can be attractive at times. Sometimes we just want clear answers. We want direction. We love our GPS, don't we? Turn left, go 100 yards. Turn right, you've arrived at your destination. Wouldn't it be nice if we had a GPS for faith? Get baptized, say the following prayer, don't murder anyone, give a bit of money to a church...you've arrived at Holy. It's tempting, isn't it? We just want answers. We just want a clear path. Tell me what to do.

These preachers to the Philippians offer step-by-step instructions. They provide a roadmap to holy.

Paul's heard their sermon before; in fact, he preached it, and he's confident he preached it much better. Paul says, "Listen, I was set apart by circumcision on the eighth day, not as a later convert to Judaism. I'm a member of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the twelve tribes. I was set apart as a Hebrew in name, race, and tongue. I was set apart as a Pharisee following the law, and no one could compete with my zeal. Don't even get

me started talking about zeal. I was so zealous I was persecuting everyone else!"

If holiness was measurable, as these preachers are saying, then Paul has reason to boast. Paul's had his best life now, by living as a Pharisee and having all the righteousness available through the law. He has been purpose driven. He was more driven than anyone; he had so much zeal he was persecuting Christians on behalf of the law. His purpose was the law. He has reason to boast.

But Paul boasts no more. All that gain, he counts as loss. He didn't know holy through all his zeal and determination and righteous living. He knew nothing of holy until he met holy on a road to Damascus. He was blind, but now he sees.

Paul's already been down that road to holy in the Philippian preachers' pamphlet and he isn't going to look back. He's like a man who found a pearl of great value and sold everything he had, gave up everything he had ever gained, to go and buy that one pearl. Paul has sold everything, given up everything and is now pursuing his pearl. The old life has gone. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death," says Paul, "if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

But Paul says he hasn't obtained it yet. He hasn't purchased his pearl; he doesn't hold Christ, as Christ holds him. "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal," he says, "but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

"How do we get to holy?" Many, I think, realize something mainline churches, myself included, do very well. We are great at saying what we don't like and what we don't believe and what doesn't work. We often know because, like Paul, we've been down those paths. But when someone asks an honest question, "If not this, then what, then how?" do we have an answer?

Read Paul's words that we heard today and let something different strike you. I tend to focus on what Paul is doing. I always read with excitement and vigor, "I press on, I strain forward, I press to the goal." I get so drawn in to that action, that I miss the most important action, the action that happens before Paul ever starts running.

Paul wants to take hold of Christ as Christ has *already* taken hold of him. Christ has already taken hold of Paul. Christ has already obtained us and made us his own. Before Paul ever started pressing on to holy, holy pressed on to him.

"How do we get to holy?" Holy comes to us.

Christ pressed on to redeem us, take hold of us. He pressed on, leaving the glory of heaven behind to take the form of a servant. He pressed on through Bethlehem where a king tried to kill him. He pressed on through Nazareth where his own neighbors and family didn't recognize him for who he was and questioned his authority. He pressed on through villages preaching and teaching and answering every challenge that was brought to him. "Why don't your disciples wash their hands, who are you to forgive sins, why are you healing on the Sabbath?" He pressed on through the hills of Galilee where some praised him and some told him to press right on through, "you ain't welcome here." He pressed on through the streets of Jerusalem where some cheered his name and shouted Hosanna as others grumbled that he was going to get them all killed. He pressed on through the temple where Pharisees tried to trap him and discredit him. He pressed on to an upper room to dine with a betrayer, pressed on to a garden where his friends couldn't watch with him and where soldiers came to arrest him. He pressed on through the courtroom and the mock trial, pressed on through Pilate's chamber where he was flogged and washed right off Pilate's hands. Christ pressed on to Golgotha with a cross on his back and never looked back. He was pressed on a cross and hung there. As he strained for breath he strained to you, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they do." He pressed on to death where he broke death's hold, pressed on to new life, resurrected from the dead. Christ pressed on to redeem you so he could always be with you, even to the end of the age. Christ has pressed on to your side today.

Holy has come through many dangers, toils and snares to be with you. The amazing grace of the gospel is that our salvation is secured and begins when Christ takes hold of us. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! That's the good news! Holy has come to your life, right now, not just in some heaven light years away. Salvation starts today, not only after we've pressed on for years to the goal, but right now. Heaven isn't our ultimate goal. I think that is one of the biggest mistakes of modern Christianity. We emphasize heaven so much as the reason we should be Christian, so we

can be saved from the fiery devil in the pamphlet. We aren't Christian so we can go to heaven. We are Christian so we can follow and be with Christ. Heaven just happens to be the place we can continue to dwell with Christ after our death through the power of the resurrection.

There it is--resurrection. The answer has been staring me in the face, not just in this text, but literally staring me in the face for years. I have an old *Time* magazine from years ago with the face of theologian Karl Barth on it. Next to the picture of the old theologian are the words "The goal of human life is not death, but resurrection." *The goal of human life is not death, but resurrection.* Paul presses on to the goal. He presses on to the resurrection, but he isn't just pressing on to his death. The resurrection has found him. Christ Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Paul has left his old life behind and found a new one because the holy one claimed Paul and set him apart. Paul presses on to resurrection and because the resurrection is with him, he finds it every day in each step. He keeps pressing on to his goal because with each step he's closer and with each step he's there.

There it is. I think we had the wrong destination in mind from the beginning. Holy isn't the destination; it's the person and means to get us to the goal. Our goal is resurrection. Our goal is new life and so Christ presses on with us so that we may find it from the source of life itself. If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, the old life has gone and the new life has come. I'd call that a resurrection. As we die to sin and are alive in Christ each day, I'd call that a resurrection. When we return to God with Christ leading the way and God like a father says, "My son or daughter who was dead is now alive again!" I'd call that a resurrection. When we discover a new joy or gift or passion or love has awakened in us that had long been dead, God calls that a resurrection. Each day when we put to death a selfish impulse and love and mercy springs forth in its place, God calls that a resurrection. When one day your body ceases to breathe and function, you will be called to live again by the very same Christ who died and rose again to press on with you. God calls that a resurrection. God calls you. God's upward calling is resurrection and you can participate in it today, not because of who you are or what you've done to get to holy, but because Holy got to you.