



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Oct. 8, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Measure for Measure"

Philippians 3:4b-14 (NRSV)

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.

Measure for Measure

Take a moment, and place yourself back into the memories and emotions of 2020 and 2021, when church and most of our lives were all on zoom, when we were all a bit on edge.

I am leading a Bible study over zoom from the upstairs office in our house in North Carolina. I begin, as I did all Bible Studies during the pandemic with a check in, because people needed fellowship and care, even more than they needed a Bible Study in those days. I don't remember anything else about the Bible study, except this check in by one man who is about my age and had a 3rd grader in school. He says that he's just received an email from school about his son falling deeply behind in reading, having failed to meet the competency for the latest round of standardized tests. The teacher is now asking for a meeting. And as he's telling the Bible Study this, tears are welling up in this man's eyes, his voice gets choked. Some might think this an overreaction. Having a Kindergartener of my own at the time, my heart breaks listening him; I get that dry feeling in the back of my throat. He ends saying, kids have just been through so much that year.

I remember calling him afterward. I've asked his permission to share this with you. I ask about his response in the class. He tells me, that he had always done well in school. AP classes, honor roll, turned into Dean's list in college, turned into graduate school and a steady job. "If anyone else has reason to be

confident in the flesh, I have more,” he might have said, along with our Scripture today. But he had struggled throughout, and he said, that in all those years of school, all those success stories, he always had this feeling that he was not enough. Even with all the accolades, he never felt like he measured up. And he was grieving the fact, that now his son would be weighed and measured likewise. Would be made to feel inadequate, in a city, in a school system, in a place where anything less than perfect feels not enough, where even perfection feels like a loss.

Remember, by all accounts, his was a story of success. *If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more*, he might have said.

In her memoir *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, which we are reading together on Tuesday afternoons for a class in this church, social justice activist Debby Irving writes of her childhood in a white, upper-middle class family in New England in a chapter subtitled, “The exclusive world of thriving people raising thriving children.” She talks about what was *and was not* allowed to be said among white, upper-middle class families in New England. The achievements you could talk about; the problems you had to keep to yourself. She writes:

Don’t discuss religion, politics, money, negative emotions, fears, resentments, vulnerabilities, or bodily functions. Do discuss weather, hopes and dreams, travels, who you know, who’s doing what where, commuting routes and times, consumer products you’ve tried and do or not do like,

where you...went to school, sports, and music. *Remember, problems are private.*¹

That last sentence is in italics, in order to emphasize it: *Remember, problems are private.*

Keep in mind Debby Irving, by all outward measures, is a story of success. Born to successful parents; graduate of the best schools; a member of the elite; yet, she found herself separated, divided. She describes in the book how she grew frustrated with her inability to speak to people different from herself; she grew frustrated, with her inability even to speak in depth about her real life – her real problems, real suffering – to anyone, because her race, class, gender, family conditioning had all taught her, that you don't talk about real things to real people. Keep it on the surface; keep it polite. Remember, problems are private.

Remember, by all accounts, Debby Irving was a success story. *If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more,* she might have said.

In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul writes that outward forms of holiness – where one comes from, what one achieves – are not the center of our existence, nor do they alone put us in touch with God. In remarkably personal terms, Paul writes about how, after trying to prove himself for so long, he found himself farther, rather than closer to God through Christ:

¹ Debby Irving, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (Cambridge: Elephant Room Press, 2014), 23.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more...[Yet] Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

You see, these outward forms of holiness can be a wall, can even block us from Christ, according to Paul, because they can make us rely on our own righteousness.

So, he adds: *For [Christ's] sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own.*

But why does self-righteousness block us from Christ? Going further, Paul says, when we rely on our own strength, our own righteousness, when we get caught up with what we are doing right, we can easily flatten the complexities of life, including ignoring or downplaying our own suffering, or castigating ourselves for our own pain.

Do you ever do that? Do you ever ignore, or deny, or shame yourself for your own pain?

The worry that's always at the back of your mind?

The grief that reappears whenever you turn a corner?

The hurt you smile through – oh, I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.

Paul continues, *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings.*

To know Christ, in other words, is to know suffering. This doesn't mean that we have to glorify suffering. Rather, Jesus, the glory of God, chooses to be right here, in solidarity with the world's suffering, in solidarity, in healing. According to Paul, it is precisely in the midst of the suffering in this world, that we find Christ.

The light shining in the darkness. John, ch. 1

- But like my congregant, who struggled with feelings of inadequacy even though everything outward looked like a success.
- And like Debby Irving, who learned very early in life that polite white people don't talk about their problems.

I wonder, if you and I, sometimes feel like we must hide our suffering, put on a brave face to this world, and not only to this world, but to one another, to this church community. There is something about church, church clothes, church elegance, church behavior, that can make us feel like we have to be perfect people in this place.

Divine worship, in its order and its beauty, it elevates us; it lifts our spirits, turns our attention to the glory of God and the goodness of creation.

But we make a mistake, if we think the beauty and elegance and depth that we find in places like Westminster Presbyterian Church mean we cannot bring our full selves here: pain, suffering, highs, lows and everything in between. You can be fine, or you can be anything but fine, in this place.

After all, Christ is not the possession of the elite and the body of Christ is not a community of perfect, trouble-free people. Rather, last week, and in our call to worship today, we read that ancient hymn of Christ, who

*Though he was in the form of God,
Did not regard equality with God
As something to be exploited,
But emptied himself...*

The point is that Christ is found in the fullness of our lives. The glory of God stands in solidarity with those cast aside to the margins. And Christ walks beside us in our pain.

So, when we bring our full selves to this community, and embrace one another in all our complexity, and stand beside one another in our pain, we follow the savior who emptied himself to be a part of this broken and beautiful world.

Thomas Long was and is a well-known Professor of Preaching first at Princeton Seminary and then Emory University. He wrote the standard introductory textbook that all preaching students read, entitled *The Witness of Preaching*.

At the end of the first chapter in that book, Long writes about his childhood church. He grew up in rural, rural Georgia, in a red clay farming town made up mostly of schoolteachers and farmers. The church did not have a fully functioning HVAC, so during worship, windows and doors stood open in the church, as

parishioners sweated out the summer months in their Sunday finest. Handheld fans waved throughout the service.

Because the doors stood open, Long remembers, a stray dog would join them every Sunday, always sliding in the open door, trying also to catch a break from the heat.

Every attempt to shew the dog away was frustrated. On one such occasion a well-intentioned usher tried to catch the dog, but instead startled the dog, who right up to the pulpit, interrupting the service. Eventually the worshippers let the dog roam. Some joked that he had a better Sunday attendance record than most parishioners.

Looking back on it now, Long writes, I realize what a trial it must have been for our ministers to attempt to lead worship and to preach on those Sundays when this mongrel was scampering around the building and nuzzling the feet of the congregation...but there was something wonderful about those times as well. Whatever else it may mean, a dog loose in worship unmask all pretense and undermines false dignity. It was clear to us all that the grace and the joy and power present in our communion...were not of our own making. We were, after all, people of little worldly standing who could not keep even our most solemn moments free of stray dogs.²

This past week, I visited one of our congregants healing from surgery. I was greeted at the door by their very enthusiastic, loving, 9-year-old chocolate Labrador. Throughout the visit, he would walk back and forth greeting each person in the room. I

² Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*. 3rd Edition. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 10.

was reminded how much I love dogs, because they always present to us as their full selves, without pretense or veneer.

Thomas Long, in his memories of his childhood, seems to suggest that the grace of God flowed *in spite of* their humble surroundings, personified by the stray dog. I would suggest otherwise. That it is precisely because the community dropped all pretense, their canine companion included, that they were able, fully, to experience and soak in the abundant love and grace of God, the God who chooses to be with us in all that we are, including our suffering, no pretense, achievement, or brave face needed.

When we come to these places fully, come to this community fully, that is when we experience the presence of Christ among us most fully.

By grace, Christ is God with us, God with all of us, together.
God with all of us, with all that is in me, with all that is in you.
Amen.