

**Knowing Christ and Making Christ Known**  
**Philippians 3: 1-16**  
**Ann Hatfield**

For five years, the middle of July was always a busy and exciting time for me. Typically, this week would be a whirlwind of final preparations for our Intergenerational Mission Trip to Washington, DC.



Over the years, groups of 15 to 20 children, youth, and adults spent five days in our nation's capital learning about poverty, hunger, and homelessness. During our stay in DC, we were hosted by a Christian ministry called The Pilgrimage.

Looking back, these trips were some of the most exhausting weeks of ministry for me! For starters, we rode the Metro throughout DC – DURING RUSH HOUR!! – with children as young as 10 years old. I have never prayed, counted, PRAYED, and recounted heads so many times!

Dinner meals were always kid-friendly food, which suited me fine – especially the ice cream! Unfortunately, sleeping arrangements also were kid-friendly – lots of bunkbeds,

packed closely together, in the basement of Church of the Pilgrims, a Presbyterian congregation. Thankfully, the older, more mature participants – like me!!! – DID NOT have to climb ladders to the top bunks!!

While sleeping on a stiff, thin, plastic-encased mattress, night after night, can FEEL like an instrument of torture, these were not torturous trips for me. On the contrary, these were some of the most rewarding and joy-filled weeks of ministry. Truly, the days spent learning and serving in community – with kids, grandparents, and friends of all ages in between – were an amazing blessing and great joy!

Meanwhile, the Apostle Paul may not even have had a mattress of straw to sleep on in his prison cell. And yet, as we begin the second half of the letter to the Philippians, Paul's message continues to be one of great joy. Which – when you stop to think about it – is rather peculiar, since Paul must have experienced incredible danger, uncertainty, and fear during his imprisonment.

How do we account for Paul's message of "Invincible Joy"?

At the beginning of chapter three, Paul writes, "Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord." Rejoice.....IN.....THE.....LORD!

Paul is calling the Philippians to know the joy he knows – not only have we been baptized with Christ – to be raised with Christ – but we experience the power of Christ's resurrection – right now – in this life, too! Even during his imprisonment, Paul "rejoices in the Lord." And, he invites his friends to do so as well.

Then suddenly, there is an abrupt shift in tone, as Paul offers a dire warning: Beware the Dogs! Look out for the Evildoers and Mutilators! Apparently, Paul is deeply troubled by others, who preach a distortion of the Gospel. Paul's opponents are forcing Gentile converts to first adhere to all Jewish laws before becoming Christians. Paul says, "No, absolutely not!" Paul will argue – until his last breath – God's grace is sufficient.

That is it. THAT'S why Paul rejoices! Our being "in the Lord" is not based on how good we are, but on how great God is. The good news we proclaim is not what we do for God; but rather, what God already has done for us – IN CHRIST!

To make his point, Paul uses a book-keeping metaphor to describe moving all his Jewish credentials – circumcised, part of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, blameless under the law – he moves all those from the gain – or the credit column – to the debit side. Paul is NOT implying the Jewish law – the Torah – is bad. Christianity is not a "better" religion than Judaism.

What Paul comes to value and prize above all else is God's singular act of the incarnation. Recall the words of Jesus himself: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them.*" (Matt. 5:17)

Jesus is born – God’s Word becomes flesh – to FULFILL the law and prophets. Paul moves his faithful adherence to the Jewish law into the loss column, because as good as it is, it cannot compare with the surpassing value of what has happened: in Jesus Christ – God our Savior has come to dwell among us – here and now!

Some of the most memorable experiences from the very real, here-and-now of the Intergenerational Mission Trips to DC were conversations we had with people who shared their personal struggles of poverty, hunger, and homelessness. One such person was David Harris. During our stay at The Pilgrimage, David would share his story, and then lead our group through a writing and reflection time.

In one of these sessions, David wrote this poem called “A Day in the Park”:

*It’s hard to overestimate  
the value of  
a kind word and a smile  
when you’re among the forgotten.*

*One summer’s day  
I met a group of friendly kids  
patrolling the park where I spent  
many of my days,  
armed with lunch bags  
and good will  
even for the likes of me.*

*I don’t remember the food  
but will never forget  
their loving kindness.*

The ham and cheese sandwich, piece of fruit, bag of pretzels, and bottle of water may have been forgettable, but David will NEVER forget the loving kindness he experienced – one human being helping another human being – on a park bench in DC.

This is what John Grillo has made possible through The Vine Ministry: feeding people who are hungry.

Being in the Lord and knowing Christ is far more than having factual or intellectual knowledge ABOUT Christ. Knowing Jesus as the Messiah, means knowing him in a personal relationship. Like Paul, you and I rejoice in the Lord, when we know Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Knowing what Christ has done for us then becomes a call on our lives to be in loving, life-giving relationships with others. It means demonstrating compassion, generosity, and kindness. It is one human being helping another in humility, love, and service.

Paul finds this humility most fully evident in the death of Jesus on the cross. The beautiful Christ Hymn from chapter two states it clearly:

*“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” (Phil. 5-8)*

Even death on a cross – an actual instrument of torture.

For Paul, knowing Jesus as Lord means becoming like him. Christ’s love, humility, and death are the basis of our Christian life, as well as the pattern of our living.<sup>1</sup> In Christ, everything is turned upside down and inside out. Losses become gains; death becomes life; and humility becomes exaltation. Therefore, Paul abandons all his privileges to become a follower of Jesus.

In addition to the book-keeping metaphor, Paul also compares himself to a runner, pressing on to the finish line. Being in the Lord and knowing Christ is a life-long endeavor. Becoming a Christian does not mean we have arrived at our goal. Following Jesus is an ongoing journey.

Westminster has a strong desire to pattern our life together on Christ – to **Be the Church** and let God build the kingdom through us. We recognize creation is not as God intends it be. The world is broken by poverty, greed, hatred, and the inequalities these cause.

Westminster’s passion is evident in our mission of “Knowing Christ and Making Christ Known,” as well as in our four Vision Teams: Expanding Our Witness, Serving Our Neighbors, Providing Affordable Housing, and Equipping the Emerging Generation. These ongoing endeavors make the love of Christ known to those around us, by demonstrating kindness, compassion, generosity, and love.

This week we received news The Pilgrimage in Washington DC is closing. Sadly, after 47 wonderful years, this ministry has become a casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like Paul, we also are experiencing danger, uncertainty, and fear, as we live through the pandemics of the coronavirus, economic crisis, and racial injustice. Already over 134,000 deaths from COVID-19 have occurred in our nation – men, women, and children. This is more than the number of military personnel who died during World War I. Tragically, many businesses and non-profit organizations also will not survive.

Even in the midst of this challenging and stressful time, Paul has a word for us: PRESS ON. We are bound together as one body, by one Spirit, in one faith, and in one Lord. Embrace the unity we have in Christ, and move into the future with confidence, trusting in God’s grace.

As theologian William Barclay writes, *“There is a certain indestructibility in the Christian joy, and it is so because Christian joy is in the Lord . . . [Christians] can lose everything, and they can lose everyone, but they can never lose Christ.”*<sup>2</sup>

We are living through an incredibly challenging time. We are experiencing tremendous loss, grief, isolation, and stress. No matter how difficult the present is or what the future holds – be assured – we can NEVER lose Christ.

Friends, knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection in the world and in our lives is the beginning of the journey, not the end of the story. Trusting there is indestructible and invincible joy along the way, let us press on together IN THE LORD.

May it be so. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Morna D. Hooker, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, p.139.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, p. 60.