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“Owning Up” **Sermon on Philippians 3:4b-14**

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Paul writes this letter to the Philippians from prison. This letter that begins with, “I thank my God every time I remember you...”

This letter that asks... “Make my joy complete...”

A letter that proclaims... “Rejoice in the Lord, always; again, I say rejoice.”

None of that sounds like a prison sentence. But that’s Paul, living the God-sized dream. The light that shines in the darkness. Listen:

Philippians 3: 4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 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 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. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

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. 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, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” In a prison cell, Paul is as free as a bird. It is as if he’s trying to tell us something.

Maybe he knows that every single one of us gets locked in a prison cell of one kind or another from time to time.

It can come by way of a disagreement or a misunderstanding that leads to deep hurt. A lack of trust leads to more things you can’t trust. Soon you’re building walls for solitary confinement. I suppose a prison cell can be formed when the ailment comes upon you, and you no longer have the freedom to go anywhere or do anything. Frustration fills the heart. “I didn’t do anything wrong. Why did I get this life sentence?”

The jail cell might be just an attitude you can’t seem to escape. It follows you everywhere you go. On a beautiful day that the Lord has made, you can be stuck behind bars with no hope. You watch the news and there is yet another war, another small group of extremists who always seem to be in control. “What’s the world coming to?” You can’t climb out of the depression.

How many prison terms are you serving right now over things you said, the hurts you feel, the worries you have, the wounds you carry?

Maybe the easier question to answer is, how on earth does Paul do it? He’s in prison but you’d swear he’s on cloud nine. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice. How does he do it? Maybe you do it for him? By that I mean, what makes Paul break out of prison is that we - the Church - come to him. He tells us that in his opening sentences.

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy... with joy... in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”

I can’t tell if he’s flown out of the prison cell and has gone to church, or, whether the church has come to him. Just in memory, suddenly two or more are gathered. And there in the mind, there in the body - Jesus Christ is present. I thank my God every time I think of you.

That’s the power of the church. I happened to visit someone on Friday who was stuck in a room. The wound was healing slowly. But the lights were on, and the joy was full. He greeted me with a big smile. “The Church is just so amazing! I’ve received so many cards and letters and calls.”

What’s funny to me is that when he said, “I’ve received cards....,” my mind went immediately to the café earlier in the week, where members of the church gathered around the tables writing care notes. Now I don’t know this, but I suspect that those who were writing the notes of care and hope were preaching to themselves. I mean, you start working with words

like care, hope, prayer, thinking of you... and those words start working on you, too. Anyway, I saw how the work of the note from Tuesday arrived on the face on Friday. "I thank my God every time I remember you."

Someone asked me this week, "What percentage of the stuff you encounter as a pastor makes you crazy versus that which gives you joy?" I said, "I don't know. I think it's got to be more joy than crazy, otherwise, I would just pack it in."

Paul certainly has the ability to tell us all the stuff that drives him crazy about the church. How it gets so stuck on the things of the flesh. Doctrine over good news. He says, "Look, if you want to talk about dotting the I's and crossing the T's of faith, I've done it better than anyone. I've got religion down." "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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

It all adds up to being faithful in most books. But because of the faith of Jesus Christ to the cross, because of that great sacrifice, because Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, things about faith don't add up as much as they sacrifice away.

In Christ, Paul's very faithful resume is wadded up and thrown in the rubbish.

Paul is talking about death. Not stop the heart death, but the kind of death that comes when you give away your life. You understand.

I understand it through those whom I met who were on death row. By that I mean, they knew they were going to die and had made their peace with it, and they have been the most free people I have ever met in my life.

I remember Bob Blake and I taking communion to Dan Cagle. It was the last time that I would see Dan. Bob then read the scripture. And then, as I said the word of institution, "On the night on which he was betrayed...", Dan said, "Bob, I'm so sorry." He was just skin and bone. Reaching out a hand, "Bob, I'm so sorry." Remembering some trivial thing of an event long ago. But, for some reason, he carried it through the years. And Bob, caught off guard, just leaned over and hugged Dan. You have to understand, Bob wasn't a hugger. And these two men wept like brothers at the table of our Lord, Jesus Christ in this prison cell that broken open to the Kingdom of Heaven. "I thank my God every time I think of you."

I think of Paul Lyle. Paul was once an usher here at church. Big guy. Tall. Bald. Huge personality as big as life. And he felt the need to wear a bright orange UT jacket just in case you might miss him. The first time I met him he said, "If you catch me with my eyes closed during your sermon, it's only because I trust you." Who tells their preacher that? But that was Paul - he had it in his DNA to empty himself of his stuff. When he was a kid, his mom pulled him aside and said, "Big day! Best behavior now! The preacher is coming over for dinner and I don't want you telling any of the family secrets." Paul nodded his head and left the room. He came back a few minutes later and asked, "Mom, what are our family secrets?" She said, "I don't know son, but I know you'll find them."

Sure enough, the preacher came over for dinner, and somewhere between "Pass the cornbread" and "Do you need any more tea?" Paul told the preacher, "Daddy and I had to miss church last Sunday because daddy was teaching me how to play poker."

Paul couldn't keep anything inside. He had to let it go! And in his last days, some of the most meaningful conversations I have ever had were with Paul. So real, so vulnerable. He went through the people he knew in his life, and in every memory some tear of the joy, the joy of Christ.

I have story after story about those who have been given a death sentence, and suddenly they have so much life, as if they were living into the resurrection. Owning it.

I keep thinking, what stops us from doing that now?

If you're stuck in a prison cell of hurt, loss, pain, sadness - the Body of Christ can come in with just a memory. And the power of the church is about giving away life - even when you're skin and bones - you can give away life. I've seen it. There's so much power in giving away love, in giving away mercy, giving away forgiveness, giving away hope. Why would anyone want to spend more time in prison.? Not when you can own up to the power of the resurrection. "I thank my God every time I remember you."

Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord, always. Always! Again, I say rejoice!