



Do You Want to Know a Secret?
“I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST!”

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Philippians 3:4b-11

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.

I wish, my friends, that I could have spared you from hearing these words. Such language. And such braggart. It's embarrassing what a braggart Paul shows himself to be. From a highly educated person who is also a diligent servant of the gospel of Jesus Christ, you just wouldn't expect such bluster, such swagger. But I can't hide it from you. It's right here for every single one of us to see. I'm not saying that any of it is untrue, but it's some of the most unashamed self-promotion you'll find anywhere in the scriptures.

Just listen to this blowhard: “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more! I was 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!”

Let's unpack this a little. Circumcised on the eighth day – just as the Law required. Born of the tribe of Benjamin – one of the two surviving tribes which established the kingdom of Judah, the tribe of the first king, King Saul. He's a purebred! Paul then brags that he's a “Hebrew of the

Hebrews” – which meant Paul could speak Hebrew, not all that common could in his day. And then he throws in our face that he’s a Pharisee – no one was more zealous in keeping God’s Law than the Pharisees.

Paul is reciting his professional resume for us, a resume, he tells us, that we can’t even begin to touch. It sounds like one of those old American Express commercials some of you remember. You know: “Circumcised on the eighth day: precious! A Hebrew born of Hebrews: matchless! Obedience to the law: blameless! For all the rest, there’s American Express.” There’s no hint here of the popular picture that Erik Erikson painted of Paul – that Paul was a sinner ashamed before God, overwhelmed by his inability to obey the law and plagued by constant guilt. No hint of inadequacy here. There’s no suggestion Paul had broken down in a fruitless attempt to win God’s approval by moral perfection. No, Paul says, “I’m blameless.”

I couldn’t claim that. Could you? You can tell, Paul is proud of his accomplishments. He doesn’t say “Aw, I used to be a Jew.” Or: “Once upon a time, I sorta was in with the Pharisees.” With traces of over-weening pride he declares: “I am the best that the people Israel have to offer.” “I am a Pharisee.” Which was like being “the best of the best of the best.” It was a high achievement. You didn’t send 100 shekels over to the Wisconsin Yeshiva Online School to get a mail-order Pharisee diploma. And you know those ten commandments God gave Moses at Mount Sinai? Paul doesn’t think of them as the Ten Suggestions. He doesn’t need them posted on the courthouse walls or carved on a monument at the capitol. They are emblazoned in his heart, and as far as they are concerned, he has been perfect. Perfect in keeping the commandments: blameless!

He’s got his professional resume down pat and he’s reciting it for you and me. He’s privileged by birth. He was raised right. And he’s lived up to his birthright with achievement. Right there in that list is everything that mattered to a religious Jew of Paul’s time. Nobody had anything on Saul of Tarsus, the indomitable Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. And here’s where Paul gets carried away and uses language that just isn’t right to use in church. After reciting this impressive resume, Paul says, “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.”

Except Paul doesn’t actually say “rubbish.” He uses a slang word for excrement that I simply won’t repeat for you today! But I will use the word that Paul used! “*Skuvbala!*” said Paul. “*Skuvbala!*”¹ That’s Greek to us, of course – and some of you here know Greek, so I’m sorry that you have to hear this. Because you know that *skuvbala* doesn’t mean “rubbish” – it’s really speech from the gutter. It’s the equivalent of saying “*Skuvbala* happens!”

But Paul discovered something else. Grace happens, too. And that is what happened to Paul. You remember how it happened. He was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians there, and the grace of Christ knocked him off his mule and changed his life. And now everything in which Paul took such pride seems like *skuvbala* to him. Worthless. But now he has a single goal in life in which he stakes his pride – and that goal, that aim, is Jesus Christ.

Do you remember the movie *City Slickers*? Three sophisticated businessmen have a mid-life crisis and decide that herding cattle for a few weeks might be just what they need. They head west and find a cowboy by the name of Curly, a wizened old coot, who specializes in these dude ranch trail drives. One day as they're poking along the range, one of the city-slickers begins to talk with Curly about life.

"A cowboy leads a different kind of life," says Curly. "When there were cowboys – they're a dying breed. Still means something to me, though. In a couple of days, we'll move this herd across the river, drive them through the valley. Ahhh," he laughs softly, "there's nothing like bringing in the herd."

"You see? Now that's great!" chirps Billy Crystal's character. "Your life makes sense to you!"

Curly laughs heartily and the businessmen become more confused than ever. At this point the worldly-wise Curly shares this insight. "You all come out here about the same age. Same problems. Spend fifty weeks a year getting knots in your rope – then you think two weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it."

The two men fall silent for a moment, then Curly continues, "Do you know what the secret of life is?"

"No, what?"

"This!" says Curly, raising his weathered hand and seeming to point a finger to the sky.

"What? Your finger?"

Still pointing, Curly says, "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that!"

"That's great, but what's the one thing?" asks Crystal.

"That, my friend" grinned Curly, "is what you've got to figure out!"

That, my friends, is what we have to figure out. Paul writes, "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as *skuvbala*, 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."

We have a lot of achievement in this sanctuary today. Great family names. People with friends in high places. People in high places. People with degrees and advanced degrees, publications and honors. People who have raised children and grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. People who served their country in various ways. Prominent people with good reputations. Many of these things are in the future for our graduates today. And those things are all right. They're fine. But Paul wants us to know is that what ultimately matters is the God we come to know through Jesus Christ.

And here's what Paul has learned really matters: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death..." I want to know Christ. That one thing is so simple for him now. Paul no longer has any distractions. This one thing is what he wants: to know Christ. Not just to know "of" him, or to "hear about him," but to know Christ so that he can become like Christ. He wants to "incarnate" Christ, to know Christ in such a way that he actually shares in Christ's sufferings and becomes like him so that he can know the power of his resurrection.

I have had the opportunity in my lifetime to witness the work of a few great masters. I saw Richard Burton perform as King Arthur in *Camelot*. I had the delightful experiences of hearing Yehudi Menuhin and Itzhak Perlman in solo violin performances. I heard Frederick Buechner, William Sloane Coffin and John Claypool deliver their now-famous Beecher lectures on preaching at Yale. Why, I even saw Mark "The Bird" Fidrych throw a two hitter in Tiger Stadium. They all made it look easy, but no one else could do what they did the way they did it because it was an achievement gained after years of sacrifice in following their passion. Paul's great passion was the pursuit of Christ. Christ was his longing and his goal. He wanted to be like Christ! He had encountered Christ on a dusty, old hot road and he had pursued him with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength ever since.

No one would accuse the Apostle Paul of excessive humility. He could be convoluted in his reasoning and opaque in his pontifications, caustic, controversial, and confusing. But you have to give Paul this: he knew what he was about. He had a clear vision of his mission in life. Where we're often overextended and dissipated, Paul is single-minded and focused: "This one thing I do" Paul says, one verse past what we read today. Paul knows what he's about and he stays at it. One thing. One thing. One thing!

What is your one thing? What is your "mission in life?" Why do you suppose God put you here on this earth? Maybe you're a youth and wondering what this life is all about. Maybe you're in college, deciding which major to choose, then changing it two or three times as dreams rise and fall. Maybe you're fabulously successful, surpassing all your goals, and then find yourself wondering, is that all there is? Or maybe, before you know it you reach a certain age, or you have a health crisis, and one day you look up and Mortality smiles at you, tapping her watch. You realize you only have a limited amount of time left and questions of purpose and legacy and meaning suddenly matter.

Or maybe the question confronts you sooner because some nosy preacher makes you stop and think about it on a Sunday morning. Like today. I'm asking you, what is your mission in life? Why did God put you here on this earth? What will your life mean? Paul had found that "one thing," that pearl of unsurpassable price. He sets aside everything that he has achieved, his blameless life, his social status, and declares, "I want to know Christ!" Everything else is, he says, not worth dirt.

Whether you are young or old, whether you are accomplished or just beginning, I want to ask you to look at your life today and consider what you are doing. Where are you headed? What are you trying to accomplish? What gets your best gifts, your greatest energies, your deepest anxieties, your most significant sacrifices? Ask yourself, "What can I give?" "How can I build

God's kingdom?" "What can I do for the God who has entrusted me with this life?" Ask yourself if what you are doing will add anything to the dominion of God in our world. Because we all come to the point where we realize we only have so much time to do something in gratitude for God.

Ask yourself just one question about what you are doing: "Is it worth it?" Paul sacrificed everything to follow Jesus, and then discovered he had gained everything that mattered because of it. Can you say that about your life?

All I know is that there is no greater cause than that of Jesus Christ. We are to be his hands and feet. His eyes and ears. We are to embody his heart. We are to be his love. We don't always get it right, but Christ is the one thing we seek to have and know. Paul thought losing everything was worth it for Christ. We should be so fortunate to discover this secret for ourselves.

ⁱ The word here, *skuvbala* or *skubala*, is used in Greek as a vulgar form for fecal matter. It's actually a stronger term than our English equivalent. It would have had a shock value for the readers of this letter which is precisely what Paul intended.