

**SERMON TITLE:** "I Want to Know Christ"

**TEXT:** Philippians 3:4b-14

**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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As we've already heard this morning, I spent part of last weekend at a local youth conference. It was a bit of an eye-opener. High-octane youth conferences haven't really been a part of my life for, well, *a few decades!*

We played paintball, dodge ball, went to ear splitting rock concerts, attended sessions, played crazy games with marshmallows and toothpicks, chugged pop, all with hundreds of other teenagers from all over the place. It was loud and large and non-stop action.

Those who know me well will undoubtedly conclude that I fit right in ☺.

All kidding aside, it was great to hang out with the youth and we had a lot of fun together, both at the conference and back here at the church with the youth group and parents from Rosemary Mennonite Church who stayed overnight with us.

On Friday night, I was standing on the sidelines of a dodge ball game after being unceremoniously knocked out by Jonathan (!), and a young woman came and stood beside me. I looked over and was a bit surprised by what I saw.

She had a blond mohawk haircut sticking straight up into the air about half a foot, with the sides of her head shaved. She had enormous headphones wrapped around her head and a huge black t-shirt that stretched down almost to her knees.

"So, you're out, eh?" she said. "Yes," I agreed. "I know," she said. "I saw you get hit. You're not very good."

Hmmm. I wasn't quite sure where this conversation was going. I tried to steer the conversation away from my own inadequacies, and asked her a few of the usual questions: "how old are you, where are you from, are you having a good time, etc." Turns out, she had come from a small community in Northern Saskatchewan. She said she was having a good time so far.

A new game started, so I was back in. This time I lasted a little longer, but after a few minutes I was back on the sidelines.

And no sooner did I arrive than my young friend was back at my side.

She told me about her hometown, about the how many people had noticed her haircut, about the tattoos she wanted to get, about how good she was at this or that thing, about how her friends back home admired her for this or that, etc.

We went for supper, and then after supper she found me again. This time, she had an autograph across her forehead. Apparently, she had asked one of the performers to “sign her head” and was quite pleased with this.

“Can you sign my t-shirt?” she asked me.

I don’t get asked for my autograph very often, but I agreed.

This sort of thing continued throughout the weekend. It seemed like every time I turned around, she was there, talking, talking, talking.... She was obviously a very lonely kid who needed someone to listen to her.

I thought about this young woman a lot throughout the conference and in the days that followed it. Why did she follow me around? Why this stream of dialogue about her exploits, the autographs she had managed to obtain, the trouble she had gotten into back home, why the outlandish personal appearance?

She was looking for relationship, certainly, but I think there was something else going on. In her very peculiar and unsettling way, this young woman was trying to establish her credentials.

She was trying to prove that she mattered, that people knew who she was. In an unfamiliar and perhaps somewhat threatening environment, she was trying to prove that she belonged.

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I thought of this young woman as I read this morning’s text at the beginning of this week.

The Apostle Paul is writing to the church in Philippi, a church that has brought him great joy and satisfaction, but also a church that needs to be warned about returning to past ways of understanding how God works and what God requires.

With Christ, there is freedom. In Christ, the grace of God transcends the law of God—Paul is quite clear about this throughout Scripture. But there are some in this church who, apparently, are being tempted toward old regulations, old markers, old ways of categorizing in and out.

Like my young friend at the conference, Paul can check off a list of his credentials:

- Circumcised on the eighth day, as all good Jewish boys are

- Member of the tribe of Benjamin—Jacob’s youngest and most-cherished son
- A Hebrew of Hebrews—pure blood!
- A Pharisee—the Pharisees often get a bad rap, but the origins of this group were good; because the Jews often found themselves being occupied or ruled by foreign powers, the Pharisees advocated an emphasis upon obedience to the books of Moses and ritual purity. They were trying to preserve their identity by virtue of obedience to the law.
- Persecutor of the church (commitment to Torah)
- Righteous—Paul not only *understood* the law but also *followed* it scrupulously!

Paul had an impressive list of credentials, an airtight case for belonging to the people and purposes of God.

Yet in verse 7, he says that he has come to regard **all of this** as loss. Why?

“Because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.”

He goes so far as to say that everything to which he previously attached value, everything that defined and gave meaning to his life, everything in which his identity was located he now regarded as rubbish, in order that he may gain Christ!

These are strong words.

“I want to know Christ.” Not, “I want to know about Christ,” not “I want to know Christian doctrine.” **“I want to know Christ.”**

There is a depth of meaning in these words of Paul’s that could take many sermons to unpack, but whatever else it means, I think at the very core, Paul is saying that his identity is now located with Jesus Christ and his purposes.

Not with his ethnicity. Not with his religious knowledge. Not with his moral performance. Not with anything but the basic reality that he is a creation of the living God, chosen, loved, and redeemed by the work of Jesus Christ.

### **What about us?**

Earlier I talked about my young friend at the conference last weekend and her attempts to prove her worth in unfamiliar surroundings.

Do we do the same thing?

Do we itemize our credentials—our education, our careers, our children’s accomplishments, our good deeds performed for God?

Do we emphasize our ethnic or denominational “purity?”

The list could go on and on.

Are we willing to set aside the things are so easy to take pride in, the things that give us status and meaning, the things that bolster our identity, in order to, like Paul, “gain Christ?”

It’s not easy. All of us, from Paul’s day to our own, **like** our credentials. We like it that our hands are clean and our blood is pure. We like the good we have done, and we like others to know about it.

Can we, like Paul, regard all of this as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ?

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Today is World Communion Sunday, where we traditionally acknowledge that we are a part of a big and deep and wide body of believers across space and time.

We acknowledge that while we, as Mennonites, make our own unique contribution to Christ’s church, that we have our own lens through which we see the life of faith and discipleship, that the church is much bigger than us.

What do Paul’s words about identity and the centrality of Christ have to say to us in this context?

Perhaps just like my young friend at the conference, and just like our own tendencies as individuals to prove ourselves to God and others, we as churches do the same thing.

Perhaps we list off our credentials—as Lutherans, as Baptists, as Christian Reformed, as Catholics, as Presbyterians, as Mennonites—as ways of establishing and justifying our identity.

Perhaps we implicitly or explicitly appeal to our own histories, our own important people, our own unique doctrinal distinctives, etc as a way of bolstering our claim to rightness or truthfulness or purity.

Perhaps today, on World Communion Sunday, God is asking us to look forward, with **all** of God’s children, to the goal, the prize, of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Does this mean that our past is irrelevant? That our distinctives and histories as Mennonites or as human beings in general are irrelevant or unimportant? Is this what Paul means when he says that he considers his past to be “rubbish?”

I don't think so. The very same qualities and experiences that Paul considers "loss for the sake of Christ" were put to very good use in the role he played in building the kingdom.

His perseverance and zeal were hugely useful in planting churches throughout the Roman Empire. His ethnicity and his knowledge of the Jewish religious/legal system allowed him to be a unique bridge between the world of a Jewish Messiah and the Gentile world of the Roman Empire.

Paul's past was important.

In the same way, I think that God has given us as Mennonites a story to tell and a way in which to tell it that the wider church family desperately needs. I think that we see some things very clearly—perhaps even more clearly than some of our brothers and sisters.

I also think that we may have our blind spots, areas where we need to listen to and learn from others.

But I am proud to inhabit the little Mennonite corner of Christ's larger church family.

I think what we can learn from today's Scripture is that being a Mennonite is a means, not an end.

The goal of a life following Jesus is not to carve out and defend some unique "Mennonite" territory in the kingdom of God.

The goal is obedience **to** and union **with** Christ.

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Paul ends this passage by urging us to "press on toward the goal to win the prize."

I, along with a few others from this community, spent Friday afternoon in a church in Pincher Creek where we honoured and remembered the life of Jeff Warkentin.

I thought of these words from Paul as I heard the story of this young man, taken far too soon. A young family who were continually reaching, stretching, and striving toward the life God had called them to.

It was a very sad memorial service, of course, but also one that gave evidence of a profoundly deep hope.

It was incredible to see Jeff's wife Tany get up and talk about the many dreams that Jeff had and how he had fulfilled so many of them in his relatively short life.

There was a sense of loss and sadness over the hopes and dreams would now go unrealized, but also a strong sense of a life very well and faithfully lived—a life of devotion to God and others, a life of self-sacrifice, and obedience to the call of God.

For me, it was a real-life example of what our text this morning is talking about. Jeff's identity in Christ was secure. Jeff was single-minded in his pursuit of the prize.

All of us embark on the journey of discipleship in the context of uncertainty, danger, pain, and loss.

But we keep our eyes on the prize because we know, ultimately, that our future does not depend on our ability to remain single-minded, but on God's faithfulness.

We know that even when our vision gets cloudy, when our resolve gets weak, that our hope is not in our abilities, but in the God whose eye is always on us, leading us, guiding us to the future he has prepared.

Near the end of the funeral, we sang these words from a song called "In the Bulb, there is a Flower":

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

May God help us to lay aside those things that we so easily and naturally gravitate towards in defining and justifying ourselves, in order to press on to the goal of knowing Christ.

Amen.