Sermon: "Who I Am"
Scripture: Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone has a 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 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 toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.
THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

Paul has just attacked the Jewish teachers and insisted that it is the Christians, not the Jews, who are truly circumcised and covenant people. His opponents might have attempted to say: "But you are a Christian and do not know what it is to be a Jew." So, Paul sets out his credentials, not in order to boast but to show that he had enjoyed every privilege which a Jew could enjoy and had risen to every attainment to which a Jew could rise. He knew what it was to be a Jew in the highest sense of the term and had deliberately abandoned it all for the sake of Jesus Christ. Every phrase in this catalogue of Paul's privileges has its special meaning; let us look at each one: He had been circumcised when he was eight days old. It had been the commandment of God to Abraham: "every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old" (Genesis 17:12); and that commandment had been repeated as a permanent law of Israel (Leviticus 12:3).

By this claim, Paul makes clear that he is not an Ishmaelite – for Ishmaelites were circumcised in the thirteenth year (Genesis 17:25) – or a convert who had come late into the Jewish faith and been circumcised as an adult. He stresses the fact that he had been born into the Jewish faith and had known its privileges and observed its ceremonies since his birth.
He was of the race of Israel. When the Jews wanted to stress their special relationship to God in its most unique sense, it was the word Israelite that they used. Israel was the name which had been specially given to Jacob by God after his wrestling with him (Genesis 32:28). It was from Israel that they in the most special sense traced their heritage. In point of fact, the Ishmaelites could trace their descent from Abraham, for Ishmael was Abraham's son by Hagar; the Edomites could trace their descent from Isaac, for Esau, the founder of the Edomite nation, was Isaac's son; but it was the Israelites alone who could trace descent from Jacob, whom God had called by the name of Israel. By calling himself an Israelite, Paul stressed the absolute purity of his descent.

He was of the tribe of Benjamin. That is to say, he was not only an Israelite; he belonged to the elite of Israel. The tribe of Benjamin had a special place in the aristocracy of Israel. Benjamin was the child of Rachel, the much-loved wife of Jacob, and of all of the twelve patriarchs he alone had been born in the promised land (Genesis 35:17-18). It was from the tribe of Benjamin that the first king of Israel had come (1Samuel 9:1-2), and it was no doubt from that very king that Paul had been given his original name Saul. When, under Rehoboam, the kingdom had been split up, ten of the tribes went off with Jeroboam, and

Benjamin was the only tribe which remained faithful with Judah (1Kings 12:21). When they returned from the exile, it was from the tribes of Benjamin and Judah that the nucleus of the reborn nation was formed (Ezra 4:1). The tribe of Benjamin had the place of honor in Israel's battle line, so that it was Benjamin who led the way; "the people of the Lord marched down for him against the mighty …. Following you, Benjamin, with your kin" (Judges 5:13-14; Hosea 5:8).
The feast of Purim, which was observed every year with such rejoicing, commemorated the deliverance of which the book of Esther tells; and the central figure of that story was Mordecai, a Benjaminite. When Paul stated that he was of the tribe of Benjamin, it was a claim that he was not simply an Israelite but that he belonged to the highest aristocracy of Israel. It would be the equivalent in England of saying that he came over from the Normans, or in America that he traced his descent from the Pilgrim fathers. So, Paul claims that from his birth he was a God-fearing, law-observing Jew, that his lineage was as pure as Jewish lineage could be, and that he belonged to the most aristocratic tribe of the Jews.
So far, Paul has been stating the privileges which came to him by birth; now he goes on to state his achievements in the Jewish faith. He was born of Hebrew parents. This is not the same as saying that he was a true Israelite. The point is this. The history of the Jews had scattered them all over the world. In every town and in every city and in every country, there were Jews. There were tens of thousands of them in Rome; and in Alexandria there were more than one million.

They stubbornly refuse to be assimilated to the nations among whom they lived; they retained faithfully their own religion and their own customs and their own laws. But it frequently happened that they forgot their own language. They became Greek speaking of necessity because they lived and worked in a Greek environment. A Hebrew was a Jew who was not only of pure racial descent but who also deliberately, and often laboriously, retained the Hebrew language. Such Jews would speak the language of the country in which they lived but also the Hebrew which was their ancestral language.
Paul claims not only to be a pure-blooded Jew but also one who still spoke Hebrew. He had been born in the Gentile city of Tarsus, but he had come to Jerusalem to be educated at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and was able, for instance, when time came, to speak to the mob in Jerusalem in their own language (Acts 21:40).
As far as the law went, he was a trained Pharisee. This is a claim that Paul makes more than once (Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5). There were not very many Pharisees – never more than 6,000 – but they were spiritual athletes of Judaism.
Their very name means, the separated ones. They had separated themselves off from all common life and from all common tasks in order to make it the one aim of their lives to keep every smallest detail of the law. Paul claims that not only was he a Jew who had retained his ancestral religion, but also, he had devoted his whole life to its most rigorous observance. No one knew better from personal experience what Jewish religion was at its highest and most demanding.
As far as zeal went, he had been a persecutor of the Church. To a Jew, zeal was the greatest quality in the religious life. Phinehas had saved the people from the wrath of God, and been given an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God (Numbers 25:11-13). It is the cry of the psalmist: "It is zeal for your house that has consumed me" (Psalm 69:9). A burning zeal for God was the hallmark of Jewish religion. Paul had been so zealous a Jew that he had tried to wipe out the opponents of Judaism. That was a thing which he never forgot. Again and again, he speaks of it (Acts 22:2-21; 26:4-23; 1Corinthians 15:8-10; Galatians 1:13).
He was never ashamed o confess his shame and to tell people that once he hated the Christ which now, he served. It is Paul's claim that he knew Judaism at its most intense and even fanatical heat.
As for righteousness which the law could produce, he was blameless. Paul claims that there was no demand of the law which he did not fulfill. So, Paul states his achievements. He was so loyal a Jew that he had never lost the ability to speak Hebrew. He was not only a religious Jew, but he was also a member of their strictest and the most self-disciplined sect; he had held in his heart a burning zeal for what he thought was the cause of God; and he had a record in Judaism in which no one could find fault. All these

things Paul might have claimed to set down on the credit side of the balance; but, when he met Christ, he wrote them off as nothing more than bad debts. The things that he had believed to be his glories were in fact quite useless. All human achievement had to be laid aside, in order that he might accept the free grace of Christ. He had to strip himself of every human claim of honor in order that he might accept in complete humility the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

So, Paul proves to these Jews that he has the right to speak. He is not condemning Judaism from the outside. He had experienced it at its highest point, and he knew that it was nothing compared with the joy which Christ had given. He knew that the only way to peace was to abandon the way of human achievement and accept the way of Grace.

Paul has just said that he came to the conclusion that all his Jewish privileges and attainments were nothing but a total loss. Maybe that was a snap decision, later to be regretted and reversed? No! Here he says, "I came to the conclusion – and I still hold that view. It was not a decision made in a moment of impulse, but one by which I still stand fast."

The great basic problem of life is to find fellowship with God and to be at peace and in friendship with him. The way to that fellowship is through righteousness, through the kind of life and spirit and attitude to himself which God desires. Because of that, righteousness, nearly always has the meaning of a right relationship with God. Paul says, "All my life I have been trying to get into a right relationship with God. I tried to find it by strict adherence to the Jewish law, but I found the law and all its ways worse than useless to achieve that end.

I found it no better than *Skubala"*. Skubala means, that which is thrown to the dogs; or also excrement (Dung). So, Paul is saying; "I found the law and all its ways of no more use in helping me to get into a right relationship with God than the refuse thrown on the garbage heap. So I gave up trying to create a goodness of my own; I came to God in humble faith, as Jesus told me to do, and I found that fellowship I had sought for so long."

Paul had discovered that a right relationship with God is based not on law but on faith in Jesus Christ. It is not achieved by any individual but given by God, not won by works but accepted in trust. Paul says, "Out of my experience I tell you that the Jewish way is wrong and futile. You will never get into a right relationship with God by your own efforts in keeping the law. You can get into a right relationship with God only by taking Jesus Christ at his word and accepting what God himself offers to you." It is not Paul's aim to know about Christ, but personally to know him. To know Christ means to Paul certain things. It means to know the power of the resurrection.

The resurrection was not simply a past event in history. It was not simply something that happened to Jesus, however important it was for him. It was a dynamic power which operated in the life of the individual Christian. It is the guarantee of the importance of this life and of the body in which we live. It was in the body that Christ rose, and it is this body which he sanctifies (1Corinthians 6:13). It is the guarantee of the life to come (Romans 8:11; 1Corinthians 15:14). Because Christ lives, we shall live also; his victory is our victory. It is the guarantee that in life and in death and beyond death the presence of the risen Lord is always with us. It is the proof that his promise to be with us always to the end of the world is true.

The resurrection of Christ is the guarantee that this life is worth living and that the physical body is sacred; it is the guarantee that death is not the end of life and that there is a world beyond; it is the guarantee that nothing in life or in death can separate us from him.

It means to know the fellowship of his sufferings.

Again and again, Paul returns to the thought that, when Christians have to suffer, they are in some strange way sharing the very suffering of Christ and are even filling up that suffering (2Corinthians 1:5, 4:10-11; Galatians 6:17; Colossians 1:24). To suffer for the faith is not a penalty; it is a privilege, for thereby we share the very work of Christ.

It means to be so united with Christ that day by day we come more to share in his death, so that finally we share in his resurrection. To know Christ means that we share the way he walked; we share the cross he bore; we share the death he died; and finally, we share the life he lives for evermore.
To know Christ is not to be skilled in any theological knowledge; it is to know him with such intimacy that in the end we are as united with him as we are with those whom we love on earth, and that, just as we share their experiences, so we also share his. Paul says that he is trying to grasp that for which he has been grasped by Christ. Paul felt that, when Christ stopped him on the Damascus Road, he had a vision and a purpose for Paul; and Paul felt that all his life he was bound to press on, in case he should fail Jesus and frustrate his dream.
Everyone is grasped by Christ for some purpose, and therefore we should all press on throughout our lives so that we may grasp that purpose for which Christ grasped us.
He is forgetting the things which are behind. That is to say, he will never glory in any of his achievements or use them as an excuse for relaxation. Paul is saying Christians must forget all that they have done and remember only what they still have to do. In the Christian life, there is no room for those who want to rest on their laurels. Then he says that he is reaching out for things which are in front. Such as a racer going hard for the finishing line. It describes someone with eyes for nothing but the goal. The person who is going flat out for the finish. So, Paul says that in Christian life we must forget every past achievement and remember only the goal which lies ahead.

Closing Prayer:
God, our creator, you have given us work to do and call us to use our talents for the good of all. Guide us as we work and teach us to live in the Spirit who made us your children, in the love that made us one body, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Benediction:
The primary aim of the life of faith, Paul insists in this letter, is to know Christ. Believers are called first and foremost to pursue and to share that "Prize" with personal and communal authenticity. Being met by Jesus in the power of the resurrection is the beginning of the journey, not the end, and it changes everything. Just ask Paul. NOW GO IN PEACE!

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