Sermon on Philippians 3:1-11
CCRC, 15 June 2025
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Living Our Identity in Christ

Dear Friends of God,
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I am so glad to have baptized baby Nora Lee today. I don't think I'll be doing any infant baptisms where I will be working. But more than that, baptism gets us to think of spiritual identity. In baptism we go down into the water with Christ in his death, and we rise up out of the water with Christ in his resurrection. Baptism connects us to the saving acts of Christ. Christ's story becomes our story.

We hear Paul speaking to his spiritual identity in verse 10:
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> I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul sets his mind, his actions and his hope upon Christ's death and resurrection. His whole life—or what remains of it at least—is wrapped up in knowing more about Christ and this power, his actions were set on participating in Christ's sufferings, and his hope was set on resurrection from the dead. His mind, his actions and his hope – his entire identity – were now focused intently on being a Jesus follower.

Baptism calls us to focus our minds on Christ. Paul says he wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Jesus's resurrection interrupted Paul and set him on a new path:
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> If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Paul was the poster child for his old identity. No one could boast more in his own blood heritage, in his faithfulness to the religion of his fathers, or in his zeal. No one could beat him at that game. He lived the dream of performance religion. He lived out of an impulse that is somewhere within all of us: the impulse to earn our own way, the impulse to reduce our faith to a set of behaviours, the impulse to be satisfied with the good things we do, and the impulse to impose your standards on everyone else. Paul calls this "confidence in the flesh."

Spiritual identity is often built on worldly achievements, religious adherence - like Paul's former zeal for the law - social status, wealth, or even personal righteousness. These are considered "gains."
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But then Paul met Jesus. On the Damascus road he saw a blinding light and heard the voice of Jesus telling him to stop all that. Meeting Jesus changed him to the core of his being. Nothing was the same anymore. After that, he thought of his old identity as rubbish.
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> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.

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The technical term he uses for garbage is more raw and gross. This is the only place in the entire Bible where it occurs, and with good reason. * Most commentators say that it is an earthy barnyard-type word that refers to animal excrement. His old ways were a stinking pile of it.
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He knew this term was offensive to polite society. He knew it would deeply offend those who lived out of the law as he once did. But no matter. He called upon the Philippians to join him in rejecting all that crappy religious thinking and practice taught by “those dogs.” He called on them to lose those things in order to gain Christ.

As Scott Hoezee puts it,
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> The revelation that God’s own Son had to die in order to secure salvation turned Paul’s world upside-down. “And to think,” Paul writes, “that at one time I thought handing God this pile of manure was going to be my entrance ticket to the kingdom!” Scott Hoezee

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Paul turned decisively away from every aspect of that man formerly known as Saul. By taking on the name Paul, he turned decisively toward his new identity in Christ. The one who once zealously persecuted Christ and his followers as the purpose of his existence now has come to value a relationship with that very Christ as the reason for living. True "gain" is no longer external markers but an internal, relational knowledge of Jesus. This radically transforms how we define success, worth, and purpose.

This new identity shifts from self to Christ. Paul had been made right before God not because of the things he had done, but because of the things Christ had done. For most of his life Paul had been saying to God, “Look at me! Look at me! See what I’ve done. Nobody does it better than me.” But now all Paul can say is “Look at Jesus! Look at Jesus! See what he’s done!”

Paul is focusing his mind on Christ. It’s as if he says, “What hit me?” and he’s spending his whole life trying to figure it out. I want to forget about all that rubbish I used to go after. I want to know what that power is that turned my life around. I want to know the power of the

resurrected Christ. Paul conceives of himself not as a person who has done so well, but as a person who has received grace.
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> not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

When our identity is rooted in Christ, we are freed from the constant need for external validation or approval. Our own accomplishments, the opinions of others, societal pressures, and material possessions lose their power to define our worth. We are freed to focus our minds on how powerful, how beautiful, how necessary is the grace that saved us. Knowing God and enjoying him forever is the call of every baptized believer.
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Baptism also calls us to focus our actions on being a follower of Christ. Paul says he wants to participate in his sufferings. "Knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" isn't something only for our thoughts and our minds. It also something that affects how we live.

Paul points to this when he says he not only wants to know the power of His resurrection, but also to
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> participate in His sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

That's because you cannot have the one without the other. Understanding leads to actions.
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Going down into the waters of baptism means we are united with Christ in his death. It means spiritual death to sin, self, and the ways of the world. It means embracing a lifestyle that is radically different from the world's values, even if it brings opposition or discomfort. Paul himself experienced much of this, being imprisoned, beaten, and shamed for his faith.

"Participation in his sufferings" means willingly embracing the cost of discipleship, understanding that following Jesus may involve hardship, discomfort, tension, and viewing those hardships as opportunities to know Christ more intimately and to be transformed into His likeness. It means reframing our suffering as opportunities to refine our faith and hearing it as a call to a full-orbed relationship with Christ that includes both His power and His pain. It means reframing our suffering within his suffering and to bear it in faith and hope.

Baptism also calls us to hope. Paul speaks about his hope when he says,
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> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

There is a mystery here. He is not being uncertain about the resurrection nor does he doubt it. But he wants somehow to live into this mystery. Rising from the waters of baptism means we are united with Christ in his resurrection. It means hope of new life with Christ in glory.

Paul knew he was close to dying. He was in jail and it didn't look good for him. Emperor Nero was at that time scapegoating all the troubles of the empire on to the Christians and was

horribly oppressing and abusing them. Paul faced this reality with an intense trust that he too will be resurrected to new life. He knew that resurrection is the reward and natural outcome of a life lived in deep fellowship with Christ, even through suffering. It's the full experience of the resurrection life that began when the put his faith in and was baptized into Christ. He anticipates this glory with great hope.

So we see Paul focusing his mind, his actions and his future on being a follower of Jesus. Paul's teaching here invites us to understand who we are in Christ. We are people who know the story of grace and the power of grace. We are people who act on our faith, even when it makes us uncomfortable, and who understand our suffering in terms of Christ's suffering. And we are a people who have deep hope in a future that includes a glorious resurrection of our bodies. All this is spoken to us in our baptism.

Over the past four years I've seen how much we long to know more about Jesus. This church loves learning. Bible studies, lectures, sermons—these are ways we've loved to learn more about Christ and his resurrection. I've also seen how we want to our actions to match our understanding. I've seen it in the way we do our daily work, how we raise our children, how we face adversity, how we engage our culture, how we live as the body of Christ. We want to live our Christian identity in every area of our lives. This moves us to give ourselves away to the poor, to help the refugee, to the marginalized, to the lonely. It moves us to take a turn in teaching the story to our young ones, to overcome our shyness and talk to our neighbor about Christ, to be engaged with the community through community gardens, summer camps, barbecues, Pickleball, university chaplaincy, in the way we do our jobs and pursue our vocations. We visit with each other, pray for each other. We have prayed for miracles, forming circles of prayer in this sanctuary. We have placed God's word in the middle of our small groups and let it speak into our lives and it has shaped us in ways we couldn't imagine.

My deep hope for Nora Lee is that she learns who she is in Christ and she in turn lives out of that identity. My deep hope for all of us is the same. That we know this Jesus who has lavished his grace upon us. To know the comfort, the strength, the deep sense of worth that comes from Christ's grace is life-giving. Jesus paid it all for you. He frees us from the performance religion that dogs us at every turn.

We are people who know Christ and the power of his resurrection and want to know him more deeply. This power moves us to be thankful in all situations, to have peace that passes all understanding. It helps us live not according to the prevailing culture, but within the prevailing culture according to the ways of Christ. It helps us to die with hope. It has us believe that in the end it's going to be all right. The power of the resurrection will one day give us new resurrected bodies like Christ himself.

The call of the gospel is always to remember who you are. Issues of our day come and go. Crises arise and cause anxiety and then they die down. Churches go through unforeseen stress. Now is such a time, when pastors have been called away and there has been conflict among us.

In crisis, in good times, in challenging times, when making decisions—remember your baptism. Remember who you are. You are people whose minds, actions and hopes are caught up in the grace, the love, the power of Christ and his resurrection. You are people who follow Jesus in your actions. You are people with hope of glory. These are the realities and practices and dreams that will give poise, strength and guidance as Community CRC moves forward in faith.

Amen