

PHILIPPIANS 3, October 4, 2020

I wrote this sermon the morning after the first Presidential Debate between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden. I freely admit that I had to bail after watching just maybe 10 minutes, and I salute all citizens who made it through the entire debate. I fear this particular debate fell far short of the ideal, but ideally, such debates are one of the ways we gather information about candidates to assess their worthiness for the position they seek. Whether you have already voted, will be voting soon, or are waiting until Nov. 3 to vote, most of us are now in a process of evaluating political candidates, not only for the Presidency, but for other elected offices as well. The evaluative process, at its best, includes gaining an understanding of the positions which candidates support, of where they've come from in terms of background, and of what they've accomplished during their years of public service. In our minds, at least, we may create a brief resume for each candidate that lays out for us what we consider noteworthy or negative. Candidates try to assist us with that, providing short and content-filled summaries of where they've been, who they've become, and what they've accomplished. They look to define themselves for us in the most favorable light possible, quite naturally. And we see this same process of glowing self-definition in the first verses of our lesson from Philippians this morning. Far from running for public office, St. Paul is in prison in Rome, with execution for his beliefs a clear and present danger. Nevertheless, he is laying out for the Christians in Philippi, to whom he is writing this letter, his resume, his glowing self-definition.

Like today's political candidates, Paul wants the Philippians to know where he's come from, who he's become, what's he's accomplished. In an ancient society where honor was everything, such honor could fall into two categories: ascribed honor, or honor into which one was born. And acquired honor, or honor that one attains through one's efforts. Paul begins by asserting his ascribed honor; he is of the proper pedigree and background through the accident of birth: a Hebrew, born of Hebrews, and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. A little like a candidate parading the fact that they were born a Kennedy or a Bush or a Roosevelt, that they come from an impressive family with the right connections. Then Paul moves into the acquired honors he holds, those for which he has worked and has achieved since that happy accident of birth. He covers his education---he studied law. He covers his work and accomplishments----he is a pharisee, the best of Jews. He parades his religious and political activism---he was so zealous on behalf of Judaism that he persecuted the early Christians. And he concludes with a rather optimistic take on his personal morality: his life has been blameless. Wow! This is a man who has everything going for him, who is an undoubted success within his culture and time. Like any good candidate, he has made a case for his worthiness. Except that now he's going to pivot abruptly away from the direction of current candidates; rather than building on this impressive edifice of himself that he has constructed, he's going to knock it all over into the rubbish bin and declare it to be just a house of cards, actually of no consequence at all.

Now, although as far as I know, none of us are candidates running for political office, nor are any of us in prison facing death for our beliefs, I do believe that most of us

have also built up our own personal little edifice of honors and achievements, our own life summary of where we started, what we achieved, and who we've become. We're likely too modest to pull it out and show it off very often, but I do believe we could put together such a positive self-definition if needed without too much effort. Certainly as one who hit 60 this year, I found myself reflecting on my life and creating a bit of a self-defining narrative in my mind; I think that's a very natural thing we all do at various times. And the process is much more well defined if we're actually creating a resume, filling out an application for a scholarship, applying for a job, seeking a promotion and so on. Because of that, we should all be able, when Paul builds up his tower of worthiness, to relate to his effort. And because of that, we should also all be able, when Paul then abruptly declares it of no consequence and consigns it to the garbage, to feel the burn. We've worked hard at building up those edifices of self-definition; we hold fast to those accomplishments and accidents of birth and achievements and awards that define our worth and value. A good candidate for public office or a job doesn't present their qualifications only to then say, "But actually, that all means nothing!" Nor do we care to do so in our own self-understanding. What is Paul about here?

We want to keep in mind that Paul was, above all else, a *changed man*. He was a man who experienced a complete turn-around in his life, much more dramatically than most, that led him to abandon his former life and take up a new calling, as if he were a new creation. He didn't abandon his former life because he was a failure within it; far from it! That's his point in listing his impressive resume. He was a huge success in the world as it was until he had an encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. As a

result of that encounter, he abandoned his former life, his prestige, his accomplishments, his kudos, and sought instead to live a life of servanthood on behalf of God in Christ. That new identity, that new claim on his life, was so powerful and overwhelming, that it made everything that had come before seem like nothing, like rubbish.

A similar story could be told of another man who may be on our minds today, St. Francis of Assisi, who is commemorated every October 4. This morning we sang that opening hymn, with words attributed to him, in his honor. St. Francis was a fascinating individual. We tend to associate him with a love for animals and all creation, which is right. But there's more to his story than that. Francis was born to a rich cloth merchant of Assisi, Italy, around 1181. He was educated, he served some time in the army, he was a well-turned out gentleman, and his father had great ambitions for him. He had a fine resume of both ascribed honor acquired honor. Kind of like St. Paul in our lesson. However, after the experience of being held as a prisoner of war for a year and coming close to dying from an illness, he completely changed his way of life. He renounced his former wealth, status, and position; he embraced poverty, he nursed lepers who were dying, he rebuilt ruined churches, and eventually he founded the order of the Franciscans, which continues to this day nearly 900 years later. His writings and thoughts are preserved in words like our opening hymn or the famed Prayer of St. Francis, a prayer for peace. His emphasis on living in harmony with creation makes him a very timely saint in our environmentally conscious age, and he is known and loved throughout the world. His commitment to poverty and service continue to inspire us these 900 years after his death. The amazing influence he continues to wield is not because of his resume: the

good breeding, the wealth, the education, the military service. It's because he concluded that all of that meant nothing, compared to the importance of knowing God in Christ. Much like St. Paul before him.

St. Paul and St. Francis lived in different times and through far different circumstances than we do. Few of us will find ourselves in such dire circumstances where abrupt shifts in self-definition occur. Most of us have likely embraced our Christian faith for some years or even decades and may have essentially grown up *in* our faith, rather than experiencing a dramatic conversion *into* it. For many of us, this turning *away* from an obsession with worldly credentials and impressive resumes and turning *towards* a Christ-like life, is quite possibly more of a process over time, one which we are still undertaking. I don't think there's much point in beating ourselves up for not having similarly dramatic conversions as these two saints; but I do believe there is a point in finding in their example and in St. Paul's words in these verses some encouragement to keep trying, to keep growing, to *keep on keeping* the faith: "I press on" he writes twice within these verses. Right now it's tempting somehow to give in, give up, and tune out. But we are called to *press on* instead. To continue the process of growing into Christlike servanthood. I love this quote from Martin Luther about faith as a *process of growth*. He wrote, "This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road; all does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

Friends in Christ, we are a work in progress, and God isn't finished with us yet. We are called to reevaluate all that the world assures us makes us worthwhile and successful. We are called instead to embrace a lifestyle that responds to human need and concerns for all creation with servanthood and love. We are called *not* to pile up trophies but to stand at the foot of the cross, the ultimate symbol of love and servanthood. We are called to *press on*. Amen.