

Faith Mennonite Church
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“Losses and gains in Paul’s balance sheet”
Philippians 3

As many of you know, my mother spends her summers on Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and her winters in south Texas, not far from the Mexican border—a good life indeed! Although she is quite healthy at 89 years, she is at risk for osteoporosis and has taken preventative medicines for some years. A year or so ago, her physician in Texas took her off of one of those meds but her physician in Michigan thought it was imperative that she continue taking it. One day she called me and asked if I would “talk to Dr. Kreider and get her opinion.” It took me a moment to think of who Dr. Kreider was! Most of us know that Joan is a doctor, but she’s not one to remind us of that by requiring us to address her with her professional title.

Titles and credentials have their place. When we go to a doctor we want to know they are board certified, and if we’re going under their knife, we like to know that we’re not the first one on which they’re doing this particular procedure. Similarly, when we send our children to school, we expect that their teachers will be licensed *and* continue to learn about best practices for helping our children learn. When we call a repair person or take our car to a mechanic, we want to trust that they know what they are doing. One of the purposes of institutional church structures, like our Central Plains Mennonite Conference and the larger Mennonite Church USA, is to maintain the credentialing standards for our pastoral leaders.

But like all things, titles and credentials can go awry if they’re used for the wrong purpose. We’ve all known persons who move about with an air of entitlement, expecting a certain deference or privilege because of the title before their name or the initials that follow it. And sometimes, as we’ve seen in public education, a heightened concern for a particular kind of achievement, can lead to measures, such as teaching for a test, that hamper creativity and critical thinking. Some of us have experienced or know of churches that become so consumed with being and doing things doctrinally correct, that they fail to kindle the fire of joy and compassion and a living faith in God.

This seems to be Paul’s concern in the third chapter of Philippians. He starts this portion of his letter on the recurring theme of joy: “Rejoice in God!” he writes. Then, in what feels like a jarring turn-about, he launches into a not-so-joyful warning of the “dogs” who are making certain religious demands, namely that the Philippians practice the Jewish initiation rite of circumcision. While this seems like a different direction, perhaps it’s not. Perhaps Paul was giving this warning precisely to keep the Philippians on the path of joy. Evidently some Jewish Christians—either regular participants in the Philippian church, or perhaps visitors from another area who came and found something lacking in Philippi—were promoting, or demanding, that one couldn’t be a real Christian without becoming fully Jewish. Paul emphatically insisted that one does not have to follow the full Jewish legal code in order to follow Jesus. Paul knew from experience that leading a zealous, legalistic life led him down a very different path than the path of joy. The legalism he had followed drove him to persecute the church prior to his encounter with Christ. He had practiced a rigorous religion, but he didn’t know joy. In his zealotry he inflicted deep pain on others. In Acts 7 we read of how he stood by in approval as Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned.

Everything changed for Paul when God stopped him dead in his tracks on one of his trips to hunt down followers of Jesus. He had a profound experience that included temporary blindness and a palpable sense that the resurrected Christ was talking to him directly. That experience reordered his balance sheet and propelled his subsequent missionary work and as he traveled through Asia Minor inviting people to follow Jesus. The things that he had previously counted as assets—his Jewish heritage, the fact that he grew up speaking Hebrew within Greek culture, his stature as a Pharisee—he now transferred to the debit column. His new and singular asset was Christ. His description of what he counted as loss and gain

echoed a parable that Jesus told. “The kingdom,” said Jesus, “is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, who having found one pearl of great price, went and sold all he had, and bought it” (Matt 13:45-46).

So what did this mean for Paul? He certainly didn’t stop being zealous. And he didn’t fully do away with titles. On several occasions when his authority was in question, he made a case for being an apostle (1 Corinthians 1:1). But he absolutely refocused the emphasis of his zealous energy. He stopped trying to make others conform to a rigid set of rules and instead invited people to join him in a marathon of joy. For Paul this marathon was about entering and somehow coming to understand the mystery of *God entering* our human experience through Jesus. Paul ran this marathon to more fully understand how Jesus’ death revealed the profound love of God. Paul ran to comprehend how the resurrection confirmed God’s love *and* the human, embodied experience of Jesus. For Paul this was a life-long conditioning goal. The more he ran, the more convinced he became of his direction. He didn’t settle for a half-marathon, but went the full distance.

I wonder if Paul wasn’t a marathon runner at some point in his life. In 2 Timothy 4, we find the image of fighting a good fight and finishing a race. Here in Philippians 3 Paul wrote of pressing on, forgetting what is behind and straining toward the goal of complete unity with God, which ultimately meant meeting Christ in death. For Paul, all of the suffering he endured—his imprisonments, the challenges to his authority, the disappointment when churches he helped form became dysfunctional—all seemed to be part of the race. He accepted suffering as a necessary part of entering the suffering of Christ and learning to die.

I talked with Andy Martinson this week about his experience of getting ready for and running his first marathon earlier this month. After conditioning over the summer months, Andy felt ready. On the day of the marathon, things went according to his conditioning runs until mile 20 when, he said, he “hit a wall.” The pleasure of his long-distance training runs suddenly dissipated as he went into the final six miles of the course. Then it was entirely a matter of straining toward the goal and pressing on. He said it was hard to keep his chin up and his eyes on the road ahead rather than on his feet. But he stayed focused on the goal, and when he reached it and found Alisa and Phoebe waiting at the end, the agony of that final section was worth it. Joy returned.

As Andy described those final miles—the most important miles of the race—it sounded to me like a dying process. It didn’t sound like he was thinking about all his accomplishments in life; in fact, he hardly recognized his service learning students who were handing out water at one of the late mile markers. The only thing that mattered at the moment was finishing the race.

Most of us aren’t going to join the ranks of Bob Mack and Andy and start running marathons (although talking to Andy did prompt me to take up running again this week). But their example and Paul’s words to the Philippians call us to examine our balance sheets. What do we count as gain and what might we need to let go of to more fully experience the grace of God in our lives? Are we pressing toward a goal that is liberating for ourselves and others, and that brings joy and a deep connection with God? Are we encouraging our fellow travelers and reminding each other that as citizens of God’s kingdom, we do not seek advantage and ease for ourselves, our families, or our church alone, but we extend that kingdom of shalom to those beyond our most comfortable boundaries and especially to those whom our society marginalizes.

Rejoice in God, brothers and sisters, and keep pressing on!