

## “Identity & Confidence in the Flesh”

5th Sunday in Lent - April 7, 2019

Christ Church Savannah

By the Rev. Guillermo A. Arboleda

### **Philippians 3:4b-14 (NRSV)**

*If anyone else has 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 I 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.*

Good morning! My name is Guillermo Arboleda. I'm the rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in west Savannah, on Martin Luther King, Jr, Blvd. Your wonderful Associate Rector and Rector invited me to be with you this morning as part of the Adult Forum series during Lent on Beauty, Racial Reconciliation, and the Cross. I'm going to say a little bit more about myself in just a moment, but first, let me introduce today's topic.

On this past Thursday, April 4, The Episcopal Church honored the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on its calendar of saints. He is remembered on the day of his death as a Civil Rights Leader, a Prophetic Witness, and a Martyr. He was killed, Episcopalians say, for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and doing so in such a way that angered those in power. Dr. King preached the Gospel with a specific emphasis on racial healing, reconciliation, and justice.

And that brings us to St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The Apostle begins our lesson this morning with these words: *"If anyone else has 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"* (Phil 3:4b-6).

**As for me, I have some reasons to be confident in the flesh too.** Maybe not as many as Paul, but I have a few. I'm a man; I'm young; I'm white-skinned; I'm temporarily able-bodied; I'm tall; I speak English with a non-descript American accent (you can't tell where I'm from!), and I don't have a Spanish accent like my grandparents do. I was born in this country so I have US citizenship; I was baptized as an infant and been in church all my life; I have a master's level education; and I've been ordained in The Episcopal Church for over three years. Some confidence in the flesh.

**But on the other hand, I have some reasons not to be so confident in the flesh.** I was born into a mixed-Latino family. I'm what my ancestors would have called Mestizo. My father's side of the family immigrated from Ecuador, and they have Spanish and indigenous descent. My mother's side of the family is from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, Caribbean Hispanics of mixed-racial heritage too. But because my family is so blended, I sometimes have trouble fitting in with other Latin Americans.

I'm the grandson of poor, working-class immigrants who settled in New York City many decades ago. I grew up speaking English in school during the week and Spanish at my grandparents' houses over the weekend. Like many Latinos/as in this country, I'm not quite Hispanic enough to fit in my ancestral cultures, and not quite American enough to fit in this culture. Oh, and my name is very hard for most English-speakers to pronounce. That gets old real fast.

**Which is all to say that confidence in the flesh might be overrated. It might get me some privileges, but it also has its disadvantages for most of us.**

Paul is making a similar point to the Philippian church. **When he talks about confidence in the flesh, he is referring to his ethnic identity and the religious meaning of his identity.** Paul is a member of the people of Israel, who you might remember are God's chosen people. God made special covenants with them through Abraham and Moses. Paul is from a prominent tribe: Benjamin (he's telling us who his people are). And Paul is not only an ethnic Israelite, but he also plays by the rules. He obeys the Law; his family obeyed the Law when they had him circumcised as a baby.

As an adult, he studied the Bible with the best rabbinical scholars, knowing the ins and outs of ancient Hebrew and the common Greek language used throughout the Roman Empire. Paul was trained as a Pharisee, meaning he preached and taught the Bible trying to stir up a religious revival among his people, the Jews. And we know from Acts (22:27) that Paul was a Roman citizen with all the civil rights that entailed.

**That being said, if Paul were honest, he would admit that he also has some reasons not to be confident in the flesh.** He was a Jew from Tarsus (in modern-day Turkey). That meant that he was a social and religious minority in the Roman Empire from the outskirts of the Roman Empire. At best, the Romans tolerated the Jews, but they were not considered equal members of society. They were looked on suspiciously for rejecting Greco-Roman religions; they were politically disenfranchised, even if they were citizens; and they were easily scapegoated and abused by their government for even a whiff of a crime. After all, Paul writes this letter to the Philippians from a Roman jail.

**So Paul comes to agree that confidence in the flesh is overrated. It can get you some privileges, but it also has its disadvantages.**

But Paul and I are not looking at our social identities for the sake of navel-gazing or because we're liberal snowflakes caught up in a politically-correct culture. Paul names his social identities in order to deconstruct them. See, Paul once thought that his family, his ethnicity, and his piety made him

better than other people and better in the eyes of God. He continues in our lesson, *“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 I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him”* (3:7-9a).

**Something about knowing Jesus** has rendered all of Paul’s privileges obsolete. **Something about knowing Jesus** has made all of his oppression and suffering seem bearable. **Something about knowing Jesus** changed Paul from being a proud, violent, ethnoreligious zealot into a person who would suffer physical harm from his kin in order to preach to and fellowship with the Gentiles he used to hate and fear. Paul goes from being a Jewish supremacist to being the Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13).

Paul explains in the next few verses that he made that change for the sake of one, overarching goal: **Knowing Christ** (Phil 3:10-14). He needed to examine his privileges because they prevented him and others from knowing Christ. And he needed to examine his disadvantages, which also prevent others from hearing his message and knowing Christ. Privilege and oppression are social constructs that can hinder us in our path toward Christ. They prevent us from loving our neighbor fully, so they also get in the way of loving God.

Paul examines his own identity: how it affects his view of the Gospel, how it affects his work as a bishop and missionary, and how it affects his own relationship to God and neighbor. **He does the work of self-examination and applies his insights to his ministry.**

Paul models for us how to reflect on the whole of our spiritual lives. Spirituality isn’t just about the 2 hours we spend in church on Sundays. Spirituality intersects with gender, nationality, ethnicity, race, sexuality, economics, social positions, family, friends, and everything else you can imagine in your own life. God wants to be involved in all of that mess. Even

though most of the categories I named are socially-constructed (meaning invented by people), God still cares about them.

Every facet of Paul's life mattered to God. And every part of our lives matters too. God invites us to peel back all the layers of armor we have built up over ourselves. In our vulnerability before God, we can receive the fullness of God's love and extend a richer, deeper love to our neighbors. That's how we start to love all our neighbors as we ought to love ourselves.

**Lent is a really appropriate time to dive into this work.** This is an opportunity for introspection, naming our sins, and naming our biases. Following the Apostle Paul, we are called to examine ourselves. God calls us to look at our identity, name our privileges, name our points of oppression, and then lay them before God in prayer. As we follow Jesus toward the cross, we must ask ourselves what part of us needs to die? What should we regard as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ? We'll never be able to overcome our social divisions without this step of self-examination.

We must be honest with ourselves about how who we are in this world affects our relationship to God and people. We must see the connection between knowing ourselves as we are, loving our neighbor across these social boundaries, and loving God who first loved us.

This isn't about ignoring differences. It's about seeing them for what they are and choosing to love one another anyway. Paul doesn't forget his confidence in the flesh. He doesn't forget his privilege. He sees it for what it is and rejects it so that he can start to love people who are different from him. He starts the process of reconciliation by looking at himself in the mirror. And by God's grace, we can too. Amen.