

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent  
“Pressing on, Tucked in Christ”  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
4/7/19c

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Alex Honnold is a 33-year old elite rock climber who holds the distinction of being the first person to scale the 3,000’ vertical face of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park *without any ropes or safety equipment*. Last year my wife and I went to see the movie about Honnold, entitled *Free Solo* (it recently won the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature). Dawn and I watched in breathless amazement as Honnold, who had trained and planned this climb for years, ascended this impossibly daunting mountain face with nothing but the clothes on his back, the shoes on his feet, a sack of climbing chalk for his fingers, and a whole lot of nerve. The film crew, perched or suspended at various places along the route, gave you a birds’ eye view of what this man was doing, where the slightest slip or misstep would send him plummeting to his death. At last, Alex Honnold reached the summit, and the entire theater breathed a collective sigh of relief. Yet as you thought about the movie and reflected upon what you had witnessed, for Dawn and me at least a strange sense of emptiness permeated the whole thing. As this daring, talented, and extremely self-reliant man reached forward and pressed upward, what was it all about, really? What was the point and what was the purpose? And, what will be next? (For something, some new mountain, will have to be next.)

For us the film invited all kinds of reflections upon the purpose of life and especially what it means to fear and love God and to live with faith in God—something conspicuously absent from the film.

The apostle Paul in today’s Epistle reading describes a period in his life during which he was not so unlike Alex Honnold. Not that Paul was a rock climber. But the similarity is that Paul was a most self-reliant man,

disciplined and driven. A pious Jew of the party of the Pharisees, Paul, then “Saul,” zealously endeavored to keep the law of Moses, even going over and above what his peers did. In short, Paul, whether he realized it or not, was on a quest to climb into heaven by his works.

*If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: <sup>5</sup> circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*

Paul was born into the Jewish people, and as a devout Jew Paul had done everything—and I mean everything—that the law of Moses and the traditions of his people required of him. Like rock climber Alex Hannold in his field, there was no one at the time who could boast of being a more perfect Jew than Paul, as measured by the law.

Yet once Paul met Jesus Christ, everything—and I mean everything—changed. What Paul had once trusted in—all his own personal and legal and moral attainments and achievements—Paul came to see that it was all worthless. Listen to his strong language:

*<sup>7</sup> But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. <sup>8</sup> Yet indeed I also count **all** things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of **all** things, and count them as **rubbish**, that I may gain Christ...*

Rubbish. That’s what Paul thought of all his impressive attainments. Why rubbish? Because they lacked any value for securing his relationship with God, and when trusted in, they actually *hindered* Paul’s relationship with God. Paul’s works—because Paul put his confidence in his works—crowded out Christ!

Into the trash can, then, with Paul’s pride in his pedigree! Status before God is not sealed by one’s noble birth.

Into the trash can with Paul's confidence in his legal obedience, moral uprightness, and religious zeal! Our works are stained by sin and can never satisfy God's perfect demands.

Into the trash can with it all, *and in its place let there be Christ and His righteousness alone!*

Paul's friends in Philippi, the recipients of this letter, what would they have made of these teachings? They would have been reminded, too, not to put stock in their own goodness and merit as counting for anything before God. (Otherwise, really, why did God's Son come to earth and die?) Every Philippian resident, you may know, had the distinction of being automatically a Roman citizen, with all the rights and prestige that went along with that. But as we heard a few Sundays ago, the Philippian believers were not to glory in that status, but to remember that as the baptized, their "citizenship [was] in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). Nor were they to glory in their own good works, but to trust solely in Jesus Christ.

We too are reminded today to abandon all confidence in our works.

Into the trash can with our pride in our pedigree: "I'm a life-long Missouri Synod Lutheran"; "I'm a fifth-generation Coloradan"; "I'm a founding member of this church"—*as though any of these things merited God's grace or the forgiveness of sins.*

Into the trash can, too, with all our boasting in achievements and accomplishments: "I'm a straight-A student"; "I was a state finalist in high school"; "I founded and ran my own company"; and "I'm a member of the most exclusive clubs"—*as though any of these things could help us earn God's favor and the reward of eternal life.*

And into the trash can with all our self-righteous confidence in works: "I am not like other men"; "I worship and attend Bible study every week, and serve on a Board to boot"; "I pray morning and night and

have been tithing for years”; and “All these commandments I have kept from my youth”—*as though any of these things actually satisfied the holy Law of God, to love Him above all else, and your neighbor as yourself.*

Into the trash can with all such rubbish. And may the name of Jesus alone be exalted!

That’s what Paul urges: *7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;*

One thing, Paul says, one thing is better than all the achievement and accomplishment and merit and attainment that Paul himself had produced and accumulated over a lifetime. One thing is better, yes, far better: to “gain Christ and be found in Him” (vv.8-9).

The difference between the two is night and day, because on the one hand a person is stacking up what Paul calls “my own righteousness” while on the other hand, in connection with Christ, we are dealing with “the righteousness which is from God” (v.9).

For who is this “Christ” but the one sent by God to earth, the Son of God who became man? This “Christ” who bestows “the righteousness which is from God” on all who believe in Him is the Savior who shed His blood on the cross in the place and for the sake of sinners, to cleanse us from sin and its stain.

You know, there was a time when Paul would have hoped that God, looking down upon the children of man, would see Paul the upright man, Paul the superachiever, Paul the exceptional man of zeal, discipline, and devotion...Paul the rock climber, if you will, standing alone atop his mountain, scaled without help or assistance. But now that Paul had been

shown the light, now things were different. Now Paul only desired that when God looked down upon the children of man, He would see Christ, and Paul tucked safely into Christ, covered by Christ's righteousness.

Ah, the "excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (v.8)! All the rest is rubbish.

So it was for the Christians in Philippi to whom Paul wrote this epistle. So it is for Christians today who hear the same epistle read among us. Whether you are a mother or father, a child, a youth, a single person, a woman or a man, whether you are rich or poor, intelligent or simple, whether you are a church member, a pastor, a visitor, or one learning the faith, God knows you and me...He knows that our righteousness deeds are as the book of Isaiah says "like filthy rags" before His holiness (Isaiah 64:6). That is why God sent His Son. We are acceptable to God through the merits of His sinless Son, when we believe in Him. Jesus did all things well—even absorbing all the punishment that our sins deserved. Salvation is prepared for us as a gift, and offered to us free of charge in the Gospel. Such salvation is received through faith.

Alongside faith, Paul speaks in this Scripture passage of "the knowledge" of Christ his Lord, and of "knowing" Christ. To believe in Christ is to know Him as your Lord, who was crucified, as your Savior, who rose. Such knowledge is ever deepening, ever growing. So Paul writes:

*<sup>10</sup> that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, <sup>11</sup> if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

*<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on...*

Paul was ever maturing in his relationship with Jesus in whom he believed. Paul was intent to "know" Jesus—and to know Him specifically in this way: Paul wanted to know the power of Jesus' resurrection (that is, the power for Paul of that resurrection); and Paul

wanted to know the fellowship of Jesus' sufferings (that is, Paul wanted to know how he, in suffering abuse as a Christian, had a comforting closeness with Jesus, who had also suffered in that way); and Paul wanted to be "conformed to [Jesus'] death" and finally "attain to the resurrection from the dead" (that is, Paul wanted to know through experience how he could die to sin every day, and rise to a new life every day...until at last his physical death would lead to his own resurrection on the Last Day).

We Christians will agree with Paul that we also want to know the power of Jesus' resurrection for our lives. We want to know what sort of comfort there is in suffering for being a Christian, and also how we can die to sin every day, also rising to new life every day. We want to know, finally, how to die to the world and all sin through our physical death one day, in confident anticipation of the glory of our own resurrection.

As we grow in our faith in Christ our knowledge of Jesus, listen to this wonderful word: Paul says something pretty awesome when he states, *I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.*

See who's doing the "laying hold" here? First, it's Jesus! Jesus laid hold of Paul. He laid hold of Paul first through His Word which addressed Paul and called him to faith there on the Damascus Road. And then through water and Word when Ananias baptized Paul and washed all his sins away. Paul would never, ever forget how Christ had laid hold of him, saving him from his misguided way of life and giving him a new life. To be in the safe grip of Christ, this brought Paul the greatest comfort his whole life long. It was the reason why Paul could pen a letter from prison, which is where he was when writing Philippians, and fill it with so much joy. Christ had laid hold of him. What gladness!

This morning Christ laid hold on my daughter, our sister in Christ, Thea Joy. He said, "Fear not, Thea, Satan cannot harm you now, and your

sins shall not condemn you, for you are Mine and all is well for you forever.”

We are reminded how in Baptism Christ laid hold of each one of us, saying the same thing: “Fear not, beloved, Satan cannot harm you now, and your sins shall not condemn you, for you are Mine and all is well for you forever.”

In the grip of Christ, we now press on to lay hold of the heavenly treasures that await us. In these days of Lent and all our days, we repent of our sin and the evil we still find inside us. We voice our “Amen” to the Gospel which proclaims our sins forgiven. In God’s forgiveness we leave the past behind, forgetting it as God also forgets our sins (Jeremiah 31:34), and reaching always forward to the future to which the Holy Spirit leads us. Daily we rise to newness of life as Spirit-filled children of God, bringing light into a dark world through our witness to the Savior, content to be mistreated if that should be God’s will. Through it all we rest content in “the righteousness which is from God by faith”. We rest content in Christ. When God looks down upon the children of man, God sees His Son, and each of us tucked into Christ, covered with His righteousness, with which we were clothed in Holy Baptism. We need not boast of many works or achievements; we have Christ, which is far better.

What’s more, we have a prize awaiting us. *<sup>14</sup> I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Alex Honnold, for now, is adorned with fame and praise for his June 3, 2017 death-defying feat on Yosemite’s El Capitan mountain.

Something better awaits my daughter Thea, and you and me, and all the baptized, whose faith is not in our own goodness but in the love and salvation of Jesus. A prize that the world cannot understand, because it lies beyond mountains and all that is seen here and now, and stretches out into eternity. Awaiting us is nothing less than the resurrection of the

body and the life everlasting in the kingdom to which God has called us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Reach forward, friends; press on. Christ is risen, and holds you in His grip.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen