

"THE PROPER PEDIGREE"
Philippians 3:1-14
April 7, 2019 Lent Five
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Philippians 3:1-14 (The Message)

And that's about it, friends. Be glad in God! I don't mind repeating what I have written in earlier letters, and I hope you don't mind hearing it again. Better safe than sorry—so here goes.

²⁻⁶ Steer clear of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite. All they're interested in is appearances—knife-happy circumcisers, I call them. The real believers are the ones the Spirit of God leads to work away at this ministry, filling the air with Christ's praise as we do it. We couldn't carry this off by our own efforts, and we know it—even though we can list what many might think are impressive credentials. You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book.

⁷⁻⁹ The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—God's righteousness.

¹⁰⁻¹¹ I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

¹²⁻¹⁴ I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me.

Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

Marty and I are the proud parents of two mutts. Lovable, friendly, beautiful, loyal dogs- but mutts nonetheless. They don't have American Kennel Club papers proving their pure bloodlines. They don't have long, fancy names attesting to their illustrious ancestry. Sophie is 14 years old. She is a German Shepherd, Yellow Lab mix. We found her online through a rescue group when she was three months old. Rosie is ten years old and she is a mix of so many breeds we have lost count. She was born in a litter on my sister's farm and we brought her home when she was eight weeks old.

My dogs have always been a hodge-podge of breeds. I like mutts. I know some of you have mutts and others are the proud parents of purebred dogs with AKC certification and very long, official names. I don't want to start a debate about which are better- because as any dog lover knows, your own is the very best in the world!

Those who breed and show dogs know that pure bloodlines are of the utmost importance. There is status in having a dog with a particular lineage. You can also charge more when you sell a dog if you maintain a pure family line.

If you think human beings are immune to this kind of pedigree analysis, think again. Humans are probably worse than dog lovers when it comes to announcing their illustrious family line and seeking status through their pedigree. As humble as Brethren are supposed to be, there is a great deal of pedigree arrogance among us as well.

The Church of the Brethren is a rather small denomination which brings with it both benefits and costs. On the plus side, you get to know more people better and you can make connections with Brethren all over the country and around the world easier than if there were a lot more of us. On the cost side is what we call the "Brethren name game." Those who have been born and raised in the church have probably played this game many times.

Those of you who have chosen to be a part of the Church of the Brethren without a long lineage may have witnessed this little game while being excluded from it.

Here is how it is played. Two Brethren meet up somewhere and exchange names, hometowns, and congregations. Upon hearing this information one will say, "Oh, you must be related to so-and-so who is my former pastor's cousin's sister-in-law." Once that connection is established, the other will say, "Oh you live in Lombard, Illinois, then you must go to such-and-such a church with so-and-so."

"Yes, I went to camp with their kids." And so it goes.

There is nothing wrong with making these connections --that is what makes the Church seem like one big family. The problem is that we are often more intent on making connections than we are about including those whose "only" pedigree is their faith in Jesus Christ. We make a lot of assumptions about who we think people are when we know only a few details about them. And those assumptions are often incorrect. We tend to establish our credentials, our value, our status in the church by our last name or the names of those to whom we are connected. Sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly, we exclude or diminish those whose Brethren pedigree isn't as long or "important" as we think our own is. Over the past 23 years I have heard some comments in this very congregation that made me shake my head: "Maybe she shouldn't teach Sunday School, after all, she wasn't born Brethren." "He doesn't understand how we do things here, you know, he hasn't been Brethren all of his life."

In another congregation the Nominating Committee members were discussing whether someone would be a good candidate for deacon. They were concerned that he wasn't born and raised Brethren. It took them awhile to remember the fact that he had been a member of that congregation for over fifty years! How much more Brethren did he need to be?

Leave it to the Apostle Paul to set us straight. He must have known the Church of the Brethren because in his letter to the Christians in Philippi he makes it very clear that it doesn't really matter where you come from. What matters is where you are going in your relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us- once again- that is isn't about us- it's about God.

Remember that Paul went from city to city planting house churches. Once he left that city the only way to communicate with the churches was through letters or by sending one of his assistants to visit. His letters were personal but not private. They were written to be heard- read aloud in worship. His letters were written to a specific congregation in a specific place at a specific time in history. Fortunately for us, although they weren't written to us- we can still reap the benefits of his wisdom.

The church in Philippi- made up of several house churches- had enjoyed a steady growth. Women played a prominent leadership role. The members were loyal to Paul and were generous in their giving. But as with any community of faith, there were issues and tensions. Cliques, feuds, and rivalries were alive and well. Besides the problems within the community, there were outside agitators -- Jewish Christians who felt superior to those who came to the faith as Gentiles, without a Jewish faith background. They believed the new Christians were pretenders to the faith, wanna-be covenant people who would never reach the pearly gates because they didn't observe all of the Jewish laws decreed by God. They were especially adamant about the law of circumcision. They knew, without a doubt, that if a man was not circumcised he couldn't be a part of God's family. But Paul thought this was a distortion of both Judaism and Christianity.

Remember-- Jesus was a Jew, his disciples were Jews, and his first followers were predominantly Jewish. Many of the early Jewish Christians thought the only way to become a follower of Jesus, a Christian, was to be a Jew first. Because that was the way they did it. But Paul- who was the most Jewish of any Jew in the New Testament said, "Not so fast." In his letter to the Philippians he writes, *"Yes, I used to think that way too. I thought faith was all about me. I had all of the right credentials: I was born into the Jewish faith and enjoyed all of its privileges. I observed all of the ceremonies and rituals since birth. I was a pure Israelite tracing my lineage back to our patriarch Jacob. I was an elite among elites, part of the tribe of Benjamin. I was a purebred- my daddy was a Hebrew, my mama was a Hebrew, all of their people were Hebrews, and I still speak the language. I was a pretty big deal in the Jewish world. As a Pharisee, I strictly observed and kept every detail of every law. I understood and accepted the demands of the religious life. I was passionate about pleasing God."*

Paul was a Jew's Jew. So much so that his passion for his religion caused him to seek out and destroy the followers of Jesus- who he believed were a threat to the faith. That is until the day the Risen Christ got ahold of him and suddenly,

everything changed. What was most important in his life- for his whole life- suddenly paled in comparison to his love for Christ.

Take notice of what Paul gives up for Christ- he doesn't simply give up all the things he shouldn't have been doing in the first place. He didn't toss away the left-over scraps of his life that he didn't care about. He tossed away his treasures- everything that made him who he was- everything that made him proud of who he was. He gave up that which was most important to him. And therein lies the extraordinary impact of his testimony. Paul realized that knowing Jesus Christ was more important than anything else in his life.

Paul's past was important because it made him the person he was when Christ took hold of his heart. His family connections were important because they led him in the direction where he could meet Christ. Paul doesn't say these things meant nothing- he says they meant everything. But once he met the Risen Christ, once he felt the love of Christ, once he accepted that God was doing a new thing in his life- his priorities shifted and he gained a new identity.

Jesus didn't care where Paul came from, he cared about where Paul was going. Paul was perhaps the most religious person Jesus called to follow him. Paul wasn't a lowly fisherman or a despised tax collector. He wasn't a woman or an outright sinner. He was a devout Jew whose encounter with the living Christ upset the whole apple cart of his life and made him reevaluate his values and religious credentials. After meeting Christ it didn't seem quite so important anymore that he had been circumcised on the eighth day or that he knew the Torah- the Law- frontward and backward. What mattered was his heart, his faith, his relationship with the Messiah of God.

Paul discovered that he was no longer separated from God by a list of rules and regulations. He realized that he wasn't welcomed into a relationship with God because of his bloodline but through faith. The credential he needed was a heart open to Christ.

Let's be clear that Paul wasn't ashamed of being a Jew- not before he met Christ or after. This text is not anti-Semitic. **After spending his life defending God- Paul finally realized that God doesn't need defending.** He finally understood that you shouldn't brag that you keep the commandments or that you don't. All religious pride and arrogance is unacceptable in God's eyes. Paul didn't say the Law was wrong- he just came to see that it isn't more important than God. And he doesn't say that Jews are evil- he says that the Jews that are attacking the Philippians are distorting Judaism and they are the problem- not the Jewish faith.

As a Jew and as a Christian, Paul is offended by their tactics. Paul does not lift up Christianity by disparaging his Jewish faith. And we shouldn't either.

What Paul discovered was overwhelming joy with Christ. What he discovered was grace. In his relationship with Christ he experienced unconditional love. This man, whose life was governed by over 600 religious laws, suddenly understood what it meant to be loved with no strings attached.

Paul envisioned an inclusive society where people were not sorted into categories- Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. He had hope for a

world where all people are welcomed in the family of Christ simply because they are.

Let's face it- we are all mutts- a hodge-podge of family, religious, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. But if we claim the name of Jesus Christ, then our pedigree is without fault. That doesn't make us better than anyone else- it just means we have found a home in Christ.

Our faith isn't about us- it is about what God is doing in and through us- and sometimes even in spite of us. We are a work in progress- aiming toward the goal and knowing it will take us awhile to get there.

God did a radical thing in Jesus. Jesus detached himself from everything we hold dear- family obligations, nationalistic ties, career aspirations- so that he could faithfully be who he was created to be. The fundamental change in Paul's life came about because of a relationship with the Risen Christ who reached out to him.

And so it should be with us. If knowing Jesus doesn't change who we are then we have to question the depth of our commitment to him. If our human pedigrees mean more to us than our life together in Christ then we need to re-evaluate our priorities. If our mission as a church is more about making ourselves look and feel good than it is about being who God calls us to be- then we're better off staying home on Sundays.

Our hope in the future isn't based on going to the right church or having the right name- our hope is based solely in the God we know through Christ. And that God is one of love and grace and mercy.

Being a mutt isn't such a bad thing as long as our pedigree starts and ends with Jesus Christ.

May it be so.

Amen.