

“Checkered Flag”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
May 26, 2019 - Sixth Sunday of Easter

Tomorrow morning the flag of the United States — wherever it is hoisted on a pole by those following proper protocol — will be briskly raised to the top of the staff, and then slowly and solemnly lowered to half-staff in honor of Memorial Day. It will remain there until noon, and then raised again to full-staff for the remainder of the day.

There’s something about that journey — to the top, and then down for some time, and then back to the top — that I think Paul would appreciate.

He sits in prison. He’s been in prison before, but now he faces a possible death sentence. Paul has had lots of time to develop his theology and to reflect on his life in all his travels and all his letters and all his times finding himself captive for having run afoul of the authorities in some city by preaching about Jesus. But now he faces the prospect of death and, as many of us have experienced ourselves or with loved ones, that has a way of shifting one’s perspective.

Paul lays out everything that he had going for him — and this is not that typical church lesson about material things — he’s talking about having all his spiritual ducks in a row. Cradle Presbyterian. Consistent pledger to the general fund. Sunday School teacher. An Elder and a Deacon who invites people to church. Giver of time and talent. Always pats the preacher on the back and never causes trouble.

He takes all of that and moves it from the asset side of the ledger to the loss column. And this is not an intellectual exercise for him. Paul has indeed given up everything to go where Christ has told him to go. And now he thinks of everything he had as σκύβαλα: rubbish, refuse, excrement, *insert your family’s euphemism*.

None of it matters. Knowing Christ. Gaining Christ. Following Christ. Being known by Christ. Becoming like Christ. This is what matters to him. He was at the pinnacle of faithfulness, and then he was lowered and humbled and lost. But he’s movin’ on up, with a radically transformed perspective on what his goal should be.

I’m fairly certain my grandfather thought I’d lost my mind when I headed off to seminary. He died during my first year of study. He was not a religious man. And yet I think of him and how his house was stiflingly hot in the winter, with the thermostat hovering just above eighty degrees. He didn’t like to talk about the war — about the Battle of the Bulge — but if you ever complained that it was too warm in his living room, he’d tell you he got back from Europe in 1945 and decided he’d never be cold again. When his son and namesake was killed in an Army helicopter crash on the first day of 1968 in the An Khe Pass in Vietnam, the question of what mattered came into even sharper focus for him and, in a different way, for my dad and his other siblings who’d lost their big brother.

Of course, you don’t need to have seen combat to know this experience of suddenly, or gradually, coming to the realization of what is prize and what is rubbish.

Truly, you just need to see the Hallmark Channel. While our movies and our novels and our poems remind us of what we know deep down about priorities, it takes an experience of our own to shift our perspective in a more lasting way. We need to be in the room for the diagnosis or to receive the frantic call or to kick like heck when it feels like we're drowning in a broken relationship.

This past fall our Men's Bible Study read a nifty little book by Franciscan priest Richard Rohr called *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Father Rohr has noticed how we tend to spend the first part of our lives racing up the flag pole, and then the "second half" — a half that might start when we're very young, or never at all — with a wiser, more humble approach that understands all sorts of things about what really matters. With the insight gained through brokenness and suffering, we move to the true pinnacle.

Weather permitting, the Indianapolis 500 starts just over an hour after our worship service ends. With that in mind, I asked my friend Andy, a pastor in a college town in southern Minnesota, if he had any deep theological insights about IndyCar racing. He got very excited. Andy talks about IndyCar like my dad talks about electricity: passionately, for hours on end, and in excruciating detail using words I don't understand.

All I really know is "Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines!" and that there's a bottle of milk at the end and the pit crews are amazing and that there are a bunch of flags, including a green one to start the race, a yellow one to slow everyone down if there's trouble, and the famous checkered flag when the race is over.

Andy threw a lot at me, but what stuck out was the idea that end of the race defines its shape. Strategies change as the laps fly by. You can't win the Indy 500 in the first trip around the track. A driver has to be focused on the prize of completing the race, not the insignificant fact of who is leading lap thirty-seven or which driver nearly hit you on that curve.

Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians to make clear to them that the only prize worth racing for is Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Everything else leaves us out of fuel or with busted tires or with another apt IndyCar metaphor. The true prize is being found in Christ, knowing God through him, and living for the sake of something larger than yourself. Everything else comes in a distant second.

I have a friend who organizes her to-do list each morning by setting up four quadrants on her white board: *important/urgent*, *important/not-urgent*, *not-important/urgent*, and *not-important/not-urgent*. I'm sure she got it from an old self-help book, and I'm even more sure that I should give it a try. If I do, I'm considering adding above it two other categories: "The Prize" with a cross and "σκύβαλα" with the words "everything else."

I really would like to be better at remembering what is σκύβαλα and what is truly important. And I'd *really* like to be remember without having to encounter tragedy or experience near-misses or have the former pastor go missing on a weekly basis.

Thanks be to God, we have at-least-weekly reminders, if only we will notice them.

Last week we baptized, with great fanfare, a beloved child of God. Each Sunday we fill the font with the nectar of life, straight from the Birmingham Water Works. It reminds us that in simple tap water

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Shannon Kerschner, sermon "Staring at Death" at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago 10/5/14

we meet our God, who has claimed us as beloved before we could utter a word in response.

And then there's the little Easter story that we often tell when it's time for communion, about the guys who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus, except they don't realize it's him. So they tell him about all the chaos — the cross and the tomb and how some people are saying their Lord has been raised from the dead. And then they invite him in for supper and he breaks bread and suddenly their eyes are opened and they recognize him. We tell that story for a reason: to remind us to see Christ at the table in the breaking of bread and sharing of cup. We tell it to remind us that he is the host of the meal we're sharing, and that this meal is an outpouring of grace and mystery, and that we are expected to see Christ in all of the other people sharing the meal with us.

We gather and we sing about what is truly important — about giving thanks and about an overwhelming love and about the mysteries God alone can see. We tell stories of those who showed us the way. We give our kids Bibles and make sure they have a chance to learn about what's inside those texts. We check on each other. When something hurts us or our loved ones — if we dare to share with the community — these followers of Jesus show up in astounding ways that remind us of what is prize and what is σκύβαλα.

I realize that giving a sales pitch for worshiping together to the folks who showed up on a holiday weekend is, somewhat literally, preaching to the choir. But Paul did not keep this realization to himself, he shared it with the Philippian Christians. And so you've got a bit of homework.

I suggest that you think about someone who needs these reminders — someone in this community who hasn't been with us on a Sunday morning for a bit or someone who doesn't know about this unique corner of Christianity or someone who doesn't believe that followers of Jesus mean it when they say that all are welcome. Send them a text or an email or a note and remind them that they are beloved, and they are known, and they are invited to worship.

They are invited to a place where we seek to shed the dead weight of the junk the world the piles onto us and press on with all our might toward the radical hospitality and welcome of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.