From the Pulpit of
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SARASOTA FL

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Philippians 3:4b-16
June 12, 2022

A college student was taking his first big exam in one of those big lecture halls on campus. It was an introductory class, so there were a lot of people taking the class, maybe well over 100. I don't know how colleges do written tests these days, but in my day, we had those blue books for essay exams. Remember them? Anyway, there was a time limit for taking the test, and our student was coming up on the deadline. The professor said, "Five minutes left to finish." Then, "this is your one-minute warning." The student kept writing. "Time's up," the professor said. "Get all your blue books in." The student kept writing. The professor glared at him; our guy still wrote. Finally, almost 10 minutes after the deadline, our student finished and took his book to the professor. The professor said, "This is late; I am not going to receive it, and you will get a failing grade on the exam." The student stood up straight, looked the professor in the eye, and said, "Do you know who I am?" The professor said, "I have no idea who you are. There are over 100 people in this class. And don't try to tell me about who your parents are, or how much clout they have in the community, or how much money they give to this university. I don't care who you know, or anything about your status on campus. I do not know who you are." The student said, "Good," put his blue book in the middle of all the other blue books on the desk, straightened out all the other blue books, and walked out of the room. I love that story.

Do you know who I am? We have heard that on occasion, haven't we? We may have heard that said as a kind of power play, to get people into something, like a crowded restaurant or a restricted event, or to get people out of something, like when a patrol officer stops someone for going over the speed limit. It is often used as a point of influence, to get something not available to ordinary folks. Do you know who I am? can be said by people who expect to be treated differently from others, who demand special treatment, or by people whose ego would have difficulty fitting through the doors of this sanctuary. Do you know who I am? could easily be said by someone in a position of power or status, or with an outstanding personal history or background.

Right now, here at First Presbyterian Church, there is a Pastor Nominating Committee that is hard at work, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit in directing them to the person God is calling to be the next installed pastor of the church. Just so you know—that will not be me. I think all of you know that, but it is still important for me to state that. I came out of retirement to become your bridge interim pastor, and when the new pastor is ready to arrive here, I will go back to my retirement life, which I quite enjoy, by the way.

Anyway, let's do a little hypothetical thing right now. Imagine that you are on a Pastor Nominating Committee, and you have read through a number of what are called Pastor Information Forms—our version of a fairly detailed church resume. Some have stood out more than others. Some you are interested in following up; some have gotten the "we-appreciate-your-gifts-in-ministry-but-we're-looking-in-other-directions" letter. Then you get a PIF where the person writes that he is a life-long Presbyterian who had perfect attendance in Sunday School for over 18 years (do any of you remember those perfect attendance pins that you could put on your lapel and add to them for every year of perfect attendance?). He says that he graduated first in his class from an Ivy League college, then graduated with honors from Princeton Theological Seminary (I'm a Princeton alum; I had to get that in there). At graduation he was awarded the coveted preaching prize. His father, and his grandfather were both pastors, so there is a strong family tradition he is following. He has had several successful pastorates, and has served in

leadership positions in the presbytery, as well as on the board of several community ministries. And you think to yourself, "pretty impressive."

Then, a couple of days later, you get another PIF to read. This one says that he hasn't really stayed in any one position very long, and actually, in some locations, he was asked to leave. Many of those churches still have some conflicts, and some of them are led by pastors who are doing some things that are really opposed to what the person who wrote this PIF believes. He continues by saying that he has spent time in jail because of his commitment to Jesus. The churches were fairly small, and he didn't have much of a salary from the churches, so he had to work on the side to make ends meet. He isn't married, and doesn't have any children, so he can't help build the Sunday School program that way. And while he has probably baptized some people, he doesn't really remember how many, or who they were. But he would like the opportunity to interview with the committee.

What do you do with these two PIF's? My guess is that you would want to talk to the first person, but not the second person. So maybe it would come as a surprise when you learn that the two PIF's are from the same person.

I used some literary license on this, but the first PIF is from a man named Saul of Tarsus, who had impeccable credentials. As he said, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more."[i] He was at the top of the social ladder, a man highly respected in most aspects of life. And then he met Jesus—in an unconventional way, of course, but he met Jesus. And he realized that all those things he was, all those things he had accomplished, all those things he had achieved, didn't matter. He had the approval, even the applause, of the society. It didn't matter. He was given a seat of honor wherever he went, and people looked at him with respect—didn't matter anymore. He became an itinerant preacher as he was now a follower of Jesus. He was imprisoned for his faith, threatened with the death penalty for his faith. His life changed from seeking and living in the status he had acquired, to a point where, as he wrote to the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."[ii] Paul's identity—his name was changed from Saul to Paul after that encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus—was no longer attached to his background or his achievements or his status in the social order. His identity came from his call to be a child of God and a "servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God."[iii]

Do you want to re-think which PIF you want to pursue further?

Churches are made up of all kinds of people, from all walks of life. Churches are comprised of people who are at or near the top of the social ladder, people in the middle of that ladder, and people who think they won't ever get even near the middle of the ladder. I just finished reading a wonderful book called *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, by Jonathan Bass, about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, and the eight white clergymen who are addressed in that letter. The book talks about some of the churches in Birmingham, and how, at the time of the writing of King's letter, and even, for at least one church, into the early 80s, they were strongly segregated, and each of the clergy addressed in that letter faced strong opposition from members of the church when they supported integration, even integration of their churches. Most of them were forced to leave their Birmingham churches because of their stance on integration.[iv] Maybe if churches are dealing with issues of status or trying to make a church in their own image, we can understand that. But the church of Jesus Christ is made up of all people from all walks of life, and that which draws them together and unites them is not skin color, or size of their individual bank accounts, or the zip code in which they live, but churches are made up of people who are, and are seeking to be even more, followers of Jesus Christ.

So when I title the sermon, "*Do You Know Who I Am,"*—really as a kind of introduction of myself—my first answer to that is that I am someone who seeks, even now in my usually retired years, to be a

follower of Jesus, to continue to learn and grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.[v] Yes, I am the Bridge Interim Pastor here at First Presbyterian Church of Sarasota—and please understand that I am an interim pastor, so I repeat, I am not eligible to be the installed pastor of the church. I am "temporary" here. Then again, all of us are temporary, just some are more temporary than others. But my first identity is not as interim pastor. My first identity is follower of Jesus. Jesus, the one who says to all of us, "Follow me." Jesus, the one through whom our sins are forgiven. Jesus, whose first message—and basic message throughout his public ministry—was "the kingdom of heaven is in your midst." Jesus, the one who "emptied himself and took on human form, and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."[vi] Jesus, the one who loved all people and didn't turn anyone away, regardless of what they looked like, what their background was, rich or poor, healthy or not healthy, or whom they loved. Jesus, the one who lived and died and was raised from the dead not to form a church but to begin a movement where his followers would continue to love others, to share grace with others, to live lives of gratitude and hope and compassion. Jesus, the one who promises life not just after death but transformed life *right now.* That is the Jesus I seek to follow. That is who I am as a follower of Jesus. And that is who you are as followers of Jesus.

Therefore, continues Paul, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the prize of the heavenly calling of God in Jesus Christ." Looking forward to what God is yet to do with us as individuals and as the church. Following the One who calls us from the not yet. That is who we are. That is what we do.

When I am no longer in this life, I am not going to have a tombstone with an epitaph on it. But if I did, I would want it to read that Craig Miller was a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God. I pray that you would want to be remembered that way as well.

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[i] Philippians 3:4b
[ii] I Corinthians 2:2
[iii] I Corinthians 4:1
[iv] *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, S. Jonathan Bass, LSU Press, updated edition 2021
[v] II Peter 3:18
[vi] Philippians 2:8