First Congregational UCC
October 4, 2026
Pastor Nick Hatch
*“Pressing Onward”*; Philippians 3:4b-14

Let us Pray:

God whose bonds are deeper than flesh, help us to press onward towards heaven which awaits. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our Rock and our Redeemer.

Paul’s words today begin with him sharing his source confidence. In fact, he claims to have every reason to have confidence - in his “flesh?”

What Paul means by ‘the flesh’, is the pride of the *biological lineage* cherished by the Jewish. Ancestry was very important in the ancient world, as it is today. Fantastically, Jews of the first century could trace their ancestry back to the original patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Some even knew which of Jacob’s twelve sons they were descended from.

How could one not be and justifiably proud with their divinely inspired tangible history?

Yet from Paul’s perspective their delight had turned into boastful arrogance and even notions of superiority. This automatically placed them above those who didn’t share in their lineage, forever denying new generations of non-lineage people to become part of God’s chosen.

And so “the flesh” became synonymous with the human tendency to push others down and view them as less-than or even subhuman. Which is

exactly what Paul, who was once “Saul” did in his persecution of the early church. His opening words claim his family history, and his own “dutiful” actions of locking up Christians and many saints, while serving the chief high priest- all under the guise of the “the flesh.”

Now comes the interested turn where Paul makes an argument that whatever he had gained by all his efforts, by his cherished lineage or the narrowly focused theological ramifications of his bloodline, he loses it all through his conversion. He even calls it now to be considered “Rubbish”. Because his righteousness and gain do not come from adhering to the Law in the Mosaic commandments but is obtained only as a gift of God through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One theologian muses:

The passage is thus Jesus-centered, Messiah-focused, to a quite remarkable degree. For Paul, this is a matter of *status*: God regards all Christians as being ‘in **Christ**’. It is also a matter of *personal knowledge*: not just ‘knowing about’ Jesus the Messiah but knowing him in a personal relationship. It is, thirdly, a matter of *conformity of life*: he is committed to the patterns of behavior that characterize the Messiah. -N.T.Wright

This is one of many arguments that Paul makes in his letters attempting to shift popular opinion away from strict adherence to the law, to re-define the boundaries of God’s people to include those engrafted through Jesus, called into a new living body of faithful believers in all places and all times.

Paul is describing a radical inclusion pulling back the curtain on our human tendencies of bigotry, prejudice, and intolerance.

Isn’t his argument a profound invitation? Will we join together in a communion so deeply that it shifts our identity and redefines what we personally value?

Clearly, as we gaze upon the status obsessed world around us, we have not reached this goal. But I pray that we press on to make it our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own. Beloved friends, do not consider what I have done or chosen as your pastor, but this one thing I ask of you: forget what lies behind and tears us apart or dehumanizes us, for God has called holy. Instead, I pray we will strain to face forward to what lies ahead, press onward toward our goal of being faithful to God, for the call is truly a prize, for it is a heavenly call, the call of our Still Speaking God in Christ Jesus.

When Protestant Christians receive the sacrament of communion, we use language that reflects our understanding of what the bread and cup are. We use the language of “the body of Christ” and “the cup of forgiveness”. We do not believe that the bread and juice literally become the body of Christ, rather they are powerful symbols when received in remembrance of Jesus Christ, usher in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Our Advocate and Paraclete nourish our spiritual bodies through whatever pangs of grief or outpouring of joy we are subject to.

And sometimes we say, “Food for the Journey.” Because faith is a journey and as with any journey, we need sustenance. We are but “flesh” beautiful yet imperfect, aspirational yet mired in sinful tendencies. God knows this, God created us, God came to us in human form to feel the sweat of our brow, the welling of tears from our eyes, the prick of the thorn, cool water on the tongue, and overwhelming of waves of human love and compassion.

Which means, like Jesus, to press onward and share this message and be fully engrafted into God's community, to remain faithful - we must continually ready ourselves to receive our provisions, lest we fall short of the heavenly prize to which we aspire.

God gives us communion; divine nourishment of a meal with our Risen Savior where we dine with saints in all ages and all places. From the Fox Valley to the Kurio valley, God's family is profoundly inclusive, constantly growing, and bound not by our family history, not by our intellect, not by our success, not by our race, gender, sexual orientation, economic or education prestige- but according to Paul only by our one enduring status: Children of God in Jesus the Christ. Beloved. Chosen. Whole. Inseparably bound. All through our personal relationship and commitment to the patterns and behaviors of God-in-flesh, our Immanuel - God with us.

So yeah, let us be bold in humility and regard everything else as loss, let us take a faithful measure joy in our heritage but discard any notions of superiority, because everything is subject to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.