

*Philippians 3: 4-14*  
*21 Pentecost / Proper 22 / Year A*  
*5 October 2008*  
*Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

During the mid to late 1990's Johnna and I were living in Princeton, NJ. She was finishing up her PhD and I was working for Merrill Lynch in their Corporate Headquarters. We had some good neighbors there, but there was one in particular who fashioned himself as an investor and he was doing pretty well with his stock portfolio. As I recall, he was highly invested in the high tech stocks that seemingly couldn't miss in those days. Every time I saw him out and about he always seemed to be sporting a big smile. One evening, my neighbor Scott wanted to have a conversation with me over dessert and coffee about his portfolio. I still remember what he said to me that evening. As I described the dangers of investing in the high tech market, he said, "There is too much at stake for the bottom to fall out of this market, people have too much invested and there is no way that "they," [whoever that is,] are going to let it happen." It was apparent that he was a theological student and not a business student because he clearly didn't understand what he was into and he didn't have a very clear grasp of history. Most of us know what happened when the dot-com bubble bust; a lot of people lost a lot of money, money that most couldn't afford to lose, including my neighbor Scott.

Seven to eight years later, here we are again, only this time the circumstances seem to have been much more dire for the structure of our economy. The verdict is still out on whether

government aid will be able to correct the underlying problems. One thing we know for certain, economic woes are part of our history. I still remember my grandmother telling me about giving odd jobs to men who rode the rails to find work back in the depression. These men would come right up to the house and mow the lawn or do some painting or pruning in exchange for a meal or a shower.

What the events of our collective history and those that we have witnessed these past couple of weeks have illustrated so clearly is that there is very little in this life that is certain, no matter how well we plan. In fact, none of us can even say for sure that our 401k will be worth what we need it to be worth when we decide to retire or that we will even be walking among the living come sunrise. And therein lies the central message of this passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul tells the Philippians that if anyone was secure in this world, it was he. He was a pure Jew, a Pharisee and lawyer with impeccable credentials. He was a member of the most celebrated class in Jewish society and in that he had extraordinary security with very little to worry about. Paul's stature insulated him from the hardships of the common person. And yet even given all that he had, Paul understood that he lived in a world that has always ebbed and flowed. He understood that in a single moment it could all go away, so he took the ultimate risk and jumped off the gravy train. "Whatever gains I had, [he said] these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of

the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. **For his sake** I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” Paul let it all go, everything, so that he could **know** Christ. After his conversion, Paul took one look at the volatile and temporal nature of life, and had a change of heart. He left the values he had been given by a culture and society that honored him and he said quite simply, “It is all a bunch of trash, I don’t value those things anymore because they are void of meaning and they will not last. What gives me meaning, he says, is to know Christ.

Frederick Buechner in his book, *Beyond Words*, defines knowledge the way I believe Paul understood it. “Knowing something or somebody, [he says] isn’t the same as knowing *about* them. More than just information is involved. When you are a knower, you don’t simply add to your mental store and go your way otherwise unchanged. To know is to participate in, to become imbued with, for better or worse to be affected by. When you really *know* a person or a language or a job, the knowledge becomes part of who you are. It gets into the bloodstream.”<sup>i</sup>

For Paul and for us, to know Christ is to be able to say in faith that all other pursuits in this unpredictable and uncertain world are worth nothing. What matters is what lasts and what lasts is the quality of our relationship with Christ and the quality of the relationships we have with one another:

Life is a strain, we all know it. People are often tempted to look back to the good old days, when times were easier and made more sense. My mom's dad, my grandfather, spent the last 15 years of his life living back to the 1930's, glorious times for him. What he remembered were the good times he had during a very difficult time in our history. Living in the past was his way of dealing with the strain of the present, the uncertainty of his world which, during the years at the end of his life, was significant. In his later years he struggled with the values he had always held near and dear because he realized that they weren't going to save him, so he retreated to the past and lived there until he died. Knowing Christ, Paul says, gives the strength and courage to forget what lies in the past, both the good and the bad, and to strain forward to what lies ahead, to claim the promises of living into the life that Christ has called each and every one of us to. It is never too late to take a fresh look at what it is that we really value and ask whether or not those values are enough to save our souls. In Jesus Name; Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY: 2004, pp. 214