

I Am

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Philippians 3:4b-15

*If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more:*

*I was circumcised on the eighth day.*

*I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin.*

*I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews.*

*With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee.*

*With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church.*

*With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless.*

*These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.*

*It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus. So, all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her.*

I believe it was Robert Burns who said --- the best made plans of mice and men often go awry.

Well, plans certainly have been forced to change.

2020 was a challenging year for many of us.

In one way or another --- all of us have faced loss of some kind or another

Lives lost

Jobs lost

Opportunities lost

Life postponed

But the reality is --- for most people who call Meridian Street home

2020 was an inconvenience but not a catastrophe.

Back in April we fretted over our investment accounts --- but very few wondered if they would be able to put food on the table or keep their home.

I have pondered greatly about what lessons I have learned this last year.

And I have learned a lot this past year --- especially about myself.

I have learned that pivoting is not always fun.

I have also learned that **I** needed to grow.

May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020 was just another day for me.

It was the Memorial Day holiday --- but in the midst of COVID – it was just another Monday

But for others --- the world changed once again on May 25<sup>th</sup>

A 46-year-old man was handcuffed --- accused of passing a fake \$20 bill.

As he was pulled from his car --- he seemed to be having some type of attack (maybe a panic attack) but regardless as he fell to the ground an officer came over and knelt on the area between his head and neck. He cried out that he could not breath --- eight minutes later --- he was dead.

It was all captured on video.

His name --- in case you forgot was George Floyd.

He wasn't breaking into the halls of Congress --- smashing doors and windows.

He was accused of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill.

And now he is dead.

Nothing that I have said is not a matter of public record --- but how we hear what I have just said is unique to each of us.

Our minds all ran in various directions as I spoke these words.

Some minds opened up --- because they hope that I will speak up against injustice.

Others began formulating explanations and alternate theories.

Before I go any further --- I want you to listen carefully and hear these important words from Henri Nouwen:

Remember you are held safe.

You are loved.

You are protected.

You are in communion with God and with those whom God has sent you.

What is of God will last.

It belongs to the eternal life.

Choose it, and it will be yours.

I share those words, because it is going to be easy to hear what I am saying today and for you to get defensive.

You know what I mean by that.

The proverbial "Yeah butt"

We have seen a lot of that these last couple of days.

But hear a second thing this morning --- I am telling you MY story --- and not yours.

You may sense some intersections with what I have to share --- you can ignore them if you wish --- I am preaching to myself this morning ---

but you are more than welcome to wrestle with these issues as well if you choose.

Following the death of George Floyd --- people began to protest against what they felt was an injustice --- the death of another black person.

George Floyd's name was added to a litany of others killed by police in recent years.

Rayshard Brooks

Daniel Prude

Breonna Taylor

Atatiana Jefferson

Stephon Clark

Bothem Jean

Philando Castille

Alton Sterling

Freddie Gray

Eric Garner

Tamir Rice

Michael Brown

I hate to say it but I could go on and on

Like many of you --- following the protests this summer I sought to educate myself on this crisis that seems to particularly affect black and brown men in our country.

I reread Leah Gunning Francis' book *Faith and Ferguson*, read and attended a number of webinars by Robert Jones and his book *White Too Long*, I read: *Caste* by Wilkerson, *Eight Years in Power* by Coates, *How to be an Anti-racist*, *Me and White Supremacy*, but the one that really got me (not that the others didn't kick me in the rear) --- was *White Fragility*.

I have always considered myself a progressive when it comes to issues of race --- but there was something in the way that Robin DiAngelo addressed the issue --- and threw my defensiveness back at me (unapologetically --- let me add) that got to me.

I got angry with her as I read the book.  
Eventually I slowed down and listened.

She forced me to really wrestle with my role in the systematic racism that is prevalent in our society.

I saw that reality loud and clear this past Wednesday.

I am . . .

What words do you put following that little phrase?  
And maybe most importantly --- how do those words define you?

If you have a piece of paper handy --- I encourage you to scribble the words that come to mind --  
- just write them down --- as quickly as possible

I am . . .

I am . . . working hard to change the order of those words that often have been used to define my life.

Face it --- some words that might get added are beyond our control.  
But where we put them in our pecking order --- that is my choice.  
And there is a pecking order.

I am . . .

I am --- I hope first and foremost --- that I am a child of God.  
That is one of those words, I don't think I got to choose.  
It is just reality --- I am a child of God.

God is the creator of us all --- you, me and every single human being.  
But where does that fit in my order?  
--- the pecking order that I do get to choose.

I that I am a child of God to be the first and primary descriptor of me.

I am . . . a follower of Jesus and The Christ

But there are other I am's as well

I am . . . a male

I am . . . a white male

I am . . . a citizen of the United States of America

I am . . . the beneficiary of White Privilege

I could go on and on --- but for me

I am a child of God

And

I am a follower of Jesus

--- those are the things that I want to govern my life.

Which means I must be aware of those other I am's and how they influence the way that I see the world --- and Jesus.

This is not the sermon I planned on preaching today --- but it can tell you --- it is still the same message.

Paul writes to the church at Philippi:

Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.

The question for me is what is the "upward call in Christ Jesus"?

There is not an easy answer to that question.

There are many easy answers that I can give --- but it is much more complex and nuanced than simply saying **Love God --- Love others.**

Although in a simple way --- that is what it is about.

But I am going to go back to something that I was taught about 30 years ago.

When I was the Senior Pastor at Simpson UMC in Fort Wayne --- Rev Charlie Crowder taught me a lesson I will NEVER forget.

I have shared it with you before --- but I think it is so important that I want to share it again.

Simpson was a church in a changing neighborhood in Fort Wayne.

We had prostitutes that would use the bathrooms.

We had “red coats” out in the parking lot during the service.

But the truth is --- the church was not ready to change.

We were building walls around the church to protect us from those on the outside.

It was a challenging time to be the pastor --- but there were a group of people who saw what was needed --- long before I did.

One of them was Charlie

One night at bible study --- as we got to one of those places where we thought we knew what needed to be done and it was that THEY --- and you all know who THEY are.

We knew that it was THEY that needed to change.

Charlie stood up --- walked to the center of the room and said:

If you want to see change happen

Draw a circle on the ground --- step inside of it and remember  
--- the change must start there.

I cannot change all that is wrong in our society.

But I can do my best to continue to LISTEN, LEARN and GROW so that I might act.

CS Lewis basically said the same thing that Paul did when he said:

You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.

“but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.”

So what is ahead of us --- what are we pursuing?

The question I am confronted with is which God am I pursuing?

- The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?
- The god of American Exceptionalism or Manifest Destiny?
- The god who puts me first and my interests?
- The god who supports the democratic party or the republican party?

Or the God who says:

- Sell all your possessions, give your stuff to the poor and come and follow me
- “If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn’t have any. If you have food, share it with someone else.”
- “it’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom.”
- The God who stops for a woman who is about to be killed by a mob because she doesn’t meet their standards?
- The God who invites the children to come
- The God who says there is neither slave nor freeperson, man or woman, black or white --- we are all one in Christ

Which God do I pursuit --- or have I created one to suit my needs and bank accounts?

I love that image that Cogan shared --- Jesus – give me those new glasses to see your vision and kin-dom

**I am** a child of God

But I am also a child of God that needs to grow and change and to follow Jesus more closely.

I am a child of God who has often failed to see the white privilege that surrounds me.

I am a racist who needs to work on my relationships with people of color.

None of that makes me a bad person

But I need to work harder to make sure that those things do not define me.

The Reformed Theologian John Calvin once said something to the effect that it’s by looking at our world and ourselves and seeing how broken both are that we come to realize we need a savior... Calvin was also very clear that this savior was Christ.

As I look at our world right now and as I look at myself, I believe John Calvin was right.

I see a deep deep need for the Prince of Peace and the God of Love.

So, I pledge to myself this day to be even more committed to The Christ and God’s vision of the kin-dom

I am a child of God.

I am loved and beloved.

And I have been invited to follow the God who doesn't seek power or reward --- but seeks service and sacrifice for the other.

As we go forth from here today --- let me leave you with this prayer from Rev. Jan Richardson.

Now  
more than ever  
let us be the ones  
who will not turn away.

Let us be the ones  
who will go  
farther into the wreck  
and deeper into the rubble.

Let us be the ones  
who will enter into the places  
of devastation beyond belief  
and despair beyond our imagining.

And there let us listen  
for the Spirit that brooded  
over the formless darkness,  
and there let us look again  
for the God who gathered up the chaos  
and began to create.

Let us be the ones  
who will give ourselves  
to the work of making again  
and to the endless beginning  
of creation.

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