

No Matter What: Hope

Philippians 3: 4-11

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When I lived in Fargo, I had a call as a chaplain and religion teacher at Lutheran High School and Boarding School. I had a student in one of my classes, Michael, who loved to challenge me. He loved to let me, and the entire class know how much he knew about the bible. He also shared with the class that he had more faith and was then closer to God than the rest of us. The kids in the class pretty much ignored him until that one day.

The topic was sin. The discussion surrounding sin boiled down to this, “all of us fall short of being perfect, in fact none of us can be perfect. We all sin! Every one of us. But the good news is that God’s love for us isn’t dependent on what we do! God’s love for us is unconditional, which means, there is nothing that will ever change God’s ending love for us.”

At that point Michael stood up and informed the class that I was wrong because according to him God’s love is dependent on what we do for God and it is possible not to sin, to be perfect. In fact, he said that he had been perfect by following all of the commandments for the last 6 weeks. He had been keeping track and he had not done one sin for the last 6 weeks.

To which another student immediately stood up and responded to Michael by saying, “what about boasting? Arrogance! OOPS! I guess you will have to start over.”

Michael believed that God loved each person according to their behavior. In our reading today we discover that before the apostle Paul knew Jesus, he had much the same understanding of God. He too believed the way to be loved by God was by following all the rules and by being “good”. However, once he discovered God’s love through Jesus it changed everything! He was loved by God by just being Paul. So, Paul’s mission was to let the world know that God loves all people No Matter What! Our hope for God’s love is not found in our behavior. Our hope is in the love that God already has for you and me. Today as we continue our

reading in Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi Paul addresses the hope we have in God’s love that is based solely on God’s grace. Our series in Philippians continues in Chapter 3.

Let’s look at verses 4-6. Paul writes, *though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more! I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.*

Paul was sharing with the church his credentials. Why? Well, most people find it easier to believe in an expert when something is important to them.

A few weeks ago, my husband Jim and I attended a retirement seminar. The first part of the seminar the instructor shared with the group his credentials. It immediately gave him credibility with the group. That is exactly what Paul writes does in this part of his letter. Paul starts off by reminding the reader of his impressive credentials as a Jew. He shares his near perfect living as a Pharisee. He wanted the Philippians to know that he came from a place of high religious authority. Yet that authority and his devotion to the law never got him closer to God. He thought if he just lived the “right way” by following the law that he would finally be loved and accepted by God. It just never happened. He felt like he never did enough. As hard as he tried, he seemed to fail every day.

Paul had spent his life evaluating his own behavior and the behavior of others. He made it his business to make sure everyone followed the law of God. He was a stickler on the law and when someone broke one of God’s laws, he would let him have it. There was a culture of people trying to live according to the law of God so that they would have God’s love. But they always fell short. The problem was no one ever felt like they did enough to earn God’s love.

The interesting thing is that even today many Christians believe the same thing! There are a lot of

people who still believe that following the “rules” by being a “good Christian” (whatever that means!) is how they are loved by God. That God’s love depends on one’s worthiness through behavior.

And to go even further into this hole, there is this a fear that when one messes up, and we ALWAYS do, God is mad at us so we need to try harder to be good so that God will forgive us and love us. Most days we end up feeling like we aren’t good enough, hopeless. The same way Paul felt. But then he experienced God’s complete love through Jesus. And that love is based on living as a human being, not a human doing. Just like pastor Jeff said last week. God loves us for just being human, not for what we do. That is why Paul writes that it isn’t what we do that makes us loveable to God. What makes us loveable to God is grace. We can’t earn God’s love because God already loves us to pieces!!! We are God’s beloved children not by what we do, but by God’s sheer grace.

This is what Paul refers to in the next few verses. Verses 8-9 *Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith.*

Paul refers to being made right through faith. One could interpret this text as needing to have “enough faith”. But Paul’s understanding of faith isn’t about having any amount of faith, especially enough faith. Paul understands faith as the gift ALREADY given to us by God. It isn’t something we can earn. Our faith is a gift.

One of my favorite teachers is a Franciscan Friar, Richard Rohr. He teaches that all people have 2 selves. We all have a True Self and a False self. You may wonder what is the true self and the false self? Simply put, your True Self is who you are in God’s eyes. Your false self is who you think you are in God’s eyes because of what you say and do. It is our false selves that seek approval through our actions

and beliefs. It is our false self that thinks we have to have “enough” faith to be loved by God.

Have you ever met someone who you think has “more faith” than you do? That is your false self talking. There are many people who try and measure “faith”. But faith can’t be measured. It is a gift from God, it is not earned. And there are times in our lives that we have all doubted our gift of faith. There isn’t a human being that has not experienced doubt. Because doubt is part of our faith journey. I have doubted God often in my life. I have wondered if God really loves me. I have lived in my false self by trying to earn God’s love by my actions. I have also doubted my faith because there are times in my life that I have been unable to trust and believe in God. It is discouraging. It always leaves me feeling like I can never do enough or have enough faith. That is totally my false self! Ugh! When we can learn to let go of all those false accomplishments and measurements of faith we can begin to live into our True Self.

As we live into our True Self, we come to realize that we are deeply loved apart from any sense of achievement. We realize we can’t earn love or have “enough” faith. Because God says You are already enough! I love you just as you are!!!

Paul goes on to say in verses 10 and 11, *I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death,¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!*

The death Paul describes is a death of our false selves. It’s when we die to our need to become good enough or have enough faith we can begin to live into the freeing love that God has had for us all along. We can be human beings instead of human doings. But here’s the thing, dying to our false self takes a life time. We go back and forth living in and out of our true and false selves. The good news is that the more we can recognize false selves and let go of needed to be enough, the more we begin to live into our true selves knowing that we are enough. And the best news of all is that God’s love for us never changes and that is our hope no matter what!