

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Growing in Good Soil

Philippians 3

October 8, 2023

I've been looking forward to today for a while, the 2nd Sunday in October has been circled on my calendar. Covenant Day, the 30th anniversary of DaySpring's founding. 30 years of our life as a living, breathing community in covenant with one another and with God. That's a big day, a big deal, 30 years.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, that church was about 10 years old. Paul came to Philippi in northern Greece around 50 AD, and there, started the first church on European soil. Acts 16 tells the story. About 10-11 years later in around 61 AD, he writes a letter to that congregation. That's Philippians. It's a love letter to a 10-year-old congregation.

10 years old seems so long ago for us. At 10 years old, DaySpring was growing and had a pastor who was young, dashing, and wise. We had some land and had a long discussion and prayer about building a place to call home. The congregation was at that point considering what gifts, even what sacrificial gifts, each could give to the mission and future ministry of a church they loved; they weren't just thinking about themselves but all of those who would come after them. . . You know, the more things change the more things, well, they don't stay the same, nothing ever stays exactly the same, but. . . here we are at 30, growing, and we have a pastor . . . and have some land, and a long discussion and much prayer and consideration of gifts, even sacrificial gifts to the mission and future ministry of a church we love, considering not just ourselves but those who will come after us. Here we are at 30. It's like being a kid again.

Maybe at 10 or at 30 or any time in life, we should heed the words of Paul to his beloved Philippian church friends, told in the form of autobiography. The message is: don't get so enamored with who you are and what you accomplish and the accolades you have and the accomplishments you achieve that your confidence rests in your human strength. Or as Paul puts it, "If anyone has reason to have confidence in the flesh, I have more." The message is not: *if you think you're great, get a load of me*. There's always someone better than you. No, the message is, no matter where your confidence lies from the past, no matter what your personal or congregational aspirations are for the future, nothing compares to knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

Paul puts it in dramatic terms: *Whatever gains I had I count as loss compared to knowing Christ. I regard all things as rubbish so that I may gain Christ and be found in him. I want to know Christ. Not that I have already obtained all of this but I press on to make it my own because Christ has made me his own.*

We see in Paul's story of himself a picture of faith that is immersive, not transactional. Christ is not just the means by which you level up from human goodness to righteousness, or from earth to heaven. Here we see a desire to know Christ, to live in Christ, to gain Christ, to make Christ my own because he made me his own. Total immersion, like baptism. This doesn't happen

overnight. This is a lifetime. Full conversion to Christ is the gift of a lifetime's journey, to pray this kind of prayer.

St. Francis embodies this spirituality. He prayed increasingly throughout his life to identify fully and completely with Christ, even, like Paul, seeming to pray that he suffer as Christ suffered so he could know Christ fully, in joy and pain, even in suffering. To know is not just head knowledge; it is intimacy. This kind of prayer does not come overnight but is the fruit of a totally mature, totally enamored relationship of devotion and love with Christ. It is precious and it is rare. It does not come in a person or to a community trusting in or limited by the capacity of their human strength or their human wisdom or their human vision. It comes to a community that lays it all down at the foot of the cross and opens their hands and hearts to the Holy Spirit and says, "I may know a lot of things. I want to know Christ." If it weren't for that Spirit present in those who came before most of us, you would be sitting outside right now. And today, it wouldn't be so bad. If it weren't for that Spirit present in those who came before most of us, well, we wouldn't be sitting here at all.

Some of you were here from the first days when you could fit most of the congregation around a kitchen table. A few more of you have been here from the first years when you could fit most of the congregation in a living room. Those are good days. Something happens in you in the experience of being a house-sized church. You learn that loving one another cannot include avoiding one another—because there you are. You learn that loving one another isn't an idea, but it's a practice. You learn that church isn't a production; and in truth, it's in the human moments that our humanity is united with the Divine.

More of you were here when DaySpring met only on Sunday mornings in rented space. You started to look like a church, and you figured out from Day 1 that hymnals don't set themselves out on chairs and musical instruments don't play themselves and the trash doesn't magically disappear from trash cans. Most of this doesn't sound very important at all, but it is the important thing. Because you learned the work of the church is the work shared by the congregation, and you did it. You did it your way. You said: Ok, here's some jobs that need to be done: who will do it? Raise your hand or put your name on this *chart*. You said, "I'll do it, that'll be my job for a while." Something happened in the experience of trusting one another to set hymnals and line up a preacher on Sundays before you had a pastor and be the presence of Christ to one another. Do you know what happened? Church happened.

And then one day, something terrifying happened: someone joined the church--like became an official member, and you panicked for a moment. You gulped because now, it's real. And someone else's life is bound up in this, and you can't just walk away. Something happened in the experience of being bound to one another in a way when you can't just walk away. That's church.

And then one of you asked Burt to preach one Sunday, and you said, "Burt, you're not just young, dashing, and wise. You're our preacher now. You and Julie just go on back home and get your stuff and bring it to Waco. You're going to be our pastor." And they did. Doyle and Regina came. And Katina, and for many of you those names won't mean much, but they matter. They are part of us, these leaders, these spiritual guides. This community was never just about the

leaders though; there are others, so many others, those who breathed life into DaySpring and gave it a language, a vocabulary. They held it lightly and gave it away... to you.

St. Paul says he forgets what lies behind and strains forward to what lies ahead to press on toward the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. He forgets what lies behind. And I'll be honest, I think this is dangerous language for Americans, even American Christians. This is not safe in the hands of Americans. Paul is writing to people who could get stuck in the past and in their religious heritage. Americans, by contrast, are quick to forget the past as if it didn't happen or doesn't matter, but it did and it does.

David Schaengold grew up as a doctor's child on the dusty streets of an Indian reservation in northern New Mexico where he was immersed in the stories the Navajo told about the world, like about the dramatic rock outcropping nearby they called 'Winged Rock'. In their traditional religion, 'Winged Rock' is the carcass of an enormous bird on whose back the Navajo people rode when they first came into the world. Parents standing with their children at the bus stop in the morning point over to Winged Rock on the horizon and tell their children they come from somewhere and they are part of a people.

Schaengold reflects on this as an American. He writes, "There's a difference between part of a tradition and being haunted by the past. In a way, the two are opposed. Tradition is, among other things, a way of coping with the past, a form of cultural digestion. Like good digestion, it is not purely passive . . . In the absence of tradition-making and tradition-keeping, a society suffers from an undigested past. Such a society is haunted. The past acts, but it acts in a different way; often unexpected, often scary. American society is haunted. There are traditions in America, but not really tradition as such. There are plenty of traditionalists, too, but again, that's not the same thing as having a tradition, and in fact, somewhat implies the opposite. By comparison with Europeans, say, Americans live in a constant Year Zero state."

In other words, we are far too eager to forget what lies behind and march forward to what lies ahead. Is this what Paul means for us? Is this for us on our Covenant Day to forget what has come before for 30 years to only look to what comes ahead as of any value?

Some say the past is prologue. Some say the past is never dead. Paul says the past is *rubbish*. That the past is trash, to be discarded on a mound of trash out of sight and mind and memory. That doesn't seem hardly possible, but this seems to be the judgment of one who knows how far knowing Christ surpasses all other things in life that have come before in our lives.

Some of you will know already that the word here in Philippians 3 isn't just generically trash. If there are any KJV readers left, you may remember snickering as a child to see the word here is *dung*. And that's actually closer to what Paul says in Greek than rubbish. Paul's pretty provocative here in his language.

If that sounds like a final and absolute judgment, let us remember that the highest and best use of dung is its return to the soil, which is what would have happened to dung in Paul's generation and most generations in history until modern times when we forgot the old ways. Dung isn't garbage; dung is the superhero of the life of soil. And soil is where life comes from.

The past isn't garbage, and the past isn't dead. The past is compost. The past is always the soil from which the life of the future springs. Paul even suggests this: *I press on to make it my own* means to stretch. We can think of that in athletic terms, someone reaching for the finish line of a race, but we can also think of it in agricultural terms, a new green seedling emerging from the soil, reaching higher for sunlight and life.

We see it all around. We see it in gardens beginning to grow again after a long summer's drought. We see it all around the church. Naomi House is a green seedling stretching to the light, growing from the good soil of 30 years of sacred and simple, of compassion and welcome. The new building project isn't even a seedling yet, but it's a seed and someday will bear fruit. What is and what will be comes from what was and what has been nurtured and cared for, and by grace. So it is with everything we are today and will be tomorrow.

Your past is your soil. Our past is soil from which new life is emerging and will itself become the soil for new life in future years. Some of the past you might like to forget, but it's in there. Some of that past you might like to change completely. That's what soil does. Give it enough time and some air, and soil receives what could just go to the dump, takes it, and transforms it for new life. God does that. Always. Your past. Ours together. All of those living room meetings; all those rented-space Sundays, all those stones you cleared from the ground that were literally beneath our feet; that brush you cleared, those hymnals you set out even this morning; those songs you sang, the prayers you prayed; those tears you wept; debates you had with others, within yourself, and with God as you worked out your faith, those babies you held and the youth you took to camp, those who became friends and those who are becoming friends now, those for whom the bell tolled on those All Saints Sundays, those baptisms, the bread and the cup, and the hot meals served in south Waco, and the hospitality house and gardens. The day you came through the doors and were planted here, which for me was 15 years ago today.

And the silence.

Sacred memory is soil. This is good soil. How do I know? Good soil teems with life, both under the surface and what is visible above. This is good soil, teeming with life, that which is buried deep beneath the surface, and that which is visible and above in the sunshine.

God began a good work in you. God is with you now, bringing us to know Christ, to be immersed in him, to take who we are and summon out what we shall be. Together.