

Giving Up
A Sermon preached by Rev. Alex Patchin McNeill
For Third Presbyterian Church, Rochester, NY
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[Philippians 3:4b-14](#)

Reading Paul's words to the community in Philippi makes me wish you could have met me in college. Even on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill which was home to about 30,000 students, I stood out. Sometimes I stood out because I wanted to: You could usually find me on the campus quad with a poster in my hand protesting against the looming war in Afghanistan, or near the student union painting a giant wooden sign in rainbow colors to advertise the next LGBT students' event. Most people could recognize me by the t-shirts I wore commemorating the protests I had attended, or the buttons on my backpack proclaiming "God loves gays." But beyond that I stood out because there were only a handful of us on campus back then who had been born and raised female but were now visibly gender non-conforming (we didn't even know the word non-binary nearly 20 years ago). What I did know was my shaved head and gender androgynous clothing wasn't something you saw very much in my southern university town.

I was well-aware folks didn't see someone like me very often because of the stares and whispers that would follow me around as I moved through the world. To protect myself from absorbing other people's discomfort, I wrapped myself in a veil of certainty about who I was and who I was up against. The worst stares and comments usually came from men... because women at least knew how to whisper and be subtle about it. Therefore, of all the things I was sure about back then, I was the MOST sure I would never be like the men who defined my existence. I had found my identity as a gender non-binary queer woman so I could safely judge and snub anyone who thought differently.

I so appreciate Paul's naming of the identities he held: as an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin, as Hebrew, as a learned Pharisee. In the first verse of this passage, Paul directly ties his confidence to his physical advantages. In our modern context we would call "physical advantages" privilege. Paul doesn't say this in the text, but his identities meant that, by birth and by station, Paul was at the height of privilege before his conversion to Christianity.

The privilege he experienced and the upbringing he had made him so sure he was right in his beliefs that he went so far as to persecute and harass the church. While at first in this text, it might sound like Paul was bragging about all the privilege he experienced, I believe he was actually confessing a litany of certainties which had held him in a fixed state of false assuredness.

What is privilege if not a blinding assurance of being absolutely correct? An assurance that the norms and standards of your community are the only way to be / behave / and live. An assurance that means you don't have to consider other possibilities / other cultures / other experiences.

Paul states outright that all of his confidence and sense of assuredness came from his identities and the belief that they were his assets.

And yet here Paul is telling us and the community at Philippi that everything he used to lean on to prop up his sense of righteousness in his standing and zeal against the church has been undone through his knowledge and understanding of Christ.

So, what happened to Paul to effect this change in him? I want to zoom in on the space between Paul's certainty of who he was and how differently he understands himself as he wrote this letter because I believe it is key to understanding what Christ's call is to us right now, in this moment.

The first lesson from Paul's life is that assuredness can do a lot of damage, particularly assuredness born of privilege. Sound familiar? It's still true.

One of the most insidious impacts of the privileges afforded by a system of white supremacy is the assuredness that comes from navigating a world constructed for those afforded the most privilege. Some racial justice educators call it the "power of normal" wherein the environment, norms, and products are catered to those at the height of privilege, which in the US context is white people, particularly white men who are able "to move through the world with an expectation that their needs be readily met." The power of normal leads to the assuredness that there is "only one right way." Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones' list "only one right way" as a key characteristic of White Supremacy Culture and define it as the "belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it.

Assuredness is a tool of white supremacy. White supremacy as a system demands certainty and assuredness, in fact it provides it.

To look for the damages wrought by assuredness we needn't look any further than our very own Presbyterian Church, USA. Many of us in the LGBTQ faith movement can remember how certain the Presbyterian Church was that LGBTQIA+ people did not have a place in leadership. They were so certain that laws were passed forbidding openly LGBTQ people from serving the church. Many people were persecuted and forced to leave this denomination due to that attitude.

However we don't need to look to the past because, we can see examples of the damages wrought by the privilege of certainty every day.

Rochester is still grappling with the horrific reality of police who were certain there was only one right way to interact with and restrain Daniel Prude, and he died as a result.

Just this week the current President of the United States contracted COVID because he believed masks were not the way to handle the disease.

We don't even need to look as far as the national news, sometimes the damages of assuredness reside within our own families, and within our own bodies.

How many of us have prolonged an argument with a loved one because we couldn't imagine a world in which we weren't in the right? How many of us have done damage to our own bodies because we believed our value was in the number we saw on a scale or the perfection of the face we saw in the mirror?

After Paul's conversion experience, the markers of his privilege remain. He doesn't claim that he was even trying to throw those markers away. He says in the text "I am Hebrew" "I am from the tribe of Benjamin" he uses the present tense. However his conversion experience completely upended his worldview. Now he claims, "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 second lesson of Paul's life is in asking what did his conversion require of him? The answer: Letting go of assuredness. Paul shifted his confidence away from the physical privileges he was granted and into a faithfulness in Christ. Paul is a reminder that letting go of assuredness is when paradigm shifts can happen. However let's be clear, Paul doesn't turn from an assured persecutor into a timid wallflower.

The opposite of assuredness isn't timidity, its curiosity. Timidity or hiding is just another form of self-protection.

After I graduated from college, my gender non-binary body left the whispering stares of North Carolina for the cold indifference of Boston, MA. I shed my cloak of false assuredness for the cloak of invisibility. I very quickly learned how to fade into the background and stare into the middle distance without looking at anyone on public transportation and walking down the street. I was relieved no one was staring at me any more because then I didn't have to face how uncomfortable I'd become in my own skin. We could all pretend I didn't exist. My former assuredness in my identity meant I would shut down the voice the back of my head whispering I was being called to a different form of embodiment. I knew if I listened to that voice my world might turn upside down, but I had carved a kind of comfort scaling the rock-wall of my expectations and sitting there was easier than facing the vertigo of letting go.

Letting go of assuredness is where paradigm shifts can happen.

Freedom and liberation is first and foremost a work of the imagination.

However, curiosity is the key to unlock the imagination's landscape. Theologian and Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggeman argues that the Hebrews were not liberated from their enslavement to the Egyptians when they crossed the Red Sea, but rather the moment Moses caught a glimpse of a possibility beyond enslavement at Mt. Sinai in the burning bush. It was curiosity that led Moses to explore the burning bush in the first place. I mean, how many of us upon seeing a shrub on fire would naturally run toward it? Curiosity allows for alternate possibilities... perhaps something holy is at work in a shrub that is burning but not consumed.

I want to be clear, being curious doesn't mean we don't have convictions. Our convictions are our anchors, not our weapons. Assuredness wants us to wield our knowledge like a weapon. Curiosity wants us to trust that our anchor will keep us from going too far, but we've got to let go and float. Where are the places in our own lives where a little curiosity is needed? Where is assuredness keeping us stuck and afraid?

Eventually I came to a point in my own journey where I was tired of running away from my fears. I was terrified that if I admitted I was transgender and started medically transitioning that I would become unrecognizable to myself, that I would become like the men who made rude comments about me on the street. I had no idea what was on the other side of this leap of faith but I knew I couldn't keep clutching to the rock I'd perched my identity on any more either. A transgender friend of mine unlocked my imagination to a whole new world of possibility. He said, "you don't have to know who you are going to become, you only have to know you want to try and find out." Curiosity, not certainty. Asking who am I allowed me the space to unfold into something new.

Getting curious is an act of embracing the unknown. Sometimes the bravest thing we can do is sit in uncertainty.

Paul was certainly sitting in uncertainty as he awaited his fate in a Roman jail cell. While he waited he wrote this letter to the Philippians. He didn't know if he ever would be free, but he did know of the kind of possibility available to him and the Philippi community through Christ.

Forty years ago, Third Presbyterian Church began a journey to a full welcome to, and advocacy with, LGBTQ+ people. This was 1980, just two years after the United Presbyterian Church had enacted policies to prevent openly LGBTQ people from serving the church. This was 1980, just one year before the New York Times reported on a "rare cancer seen in homosexuals" an early warning sign of the coming HIV/AIDS crisis. It was 1980, there was no assurance that a day would ever come where rights and recognition would be granted to LGBTQIA+ people in the church or in our world. Third Presbyterian Church could have stayed in the comfortable assurance that comes from following the rules the institutional church set forth. Instead, guided by your convictions of the love of God for all people, Third Presbyterian Church followed their curiosity towards what the church could truly be if all were celebrated for who God created them to be. The result was joining the More Light Churches Network in 1987 to declare there was "yet more light to shine" and participating in a movement that changed policies, hearts and minds, in Rochester and across the country as three decades later discriminatory barriers to participation were removed in the PC(USA).

Forty years after Third Presbyterian Church became More Light and we know there is yet more light to shine. The founders of this movement believed that the Holy Spirit is never done with her work of reforming our understanding of God's call for our world. Staying curious is an ongoing act of practicing curiosity. Claiming that there is yet More Light to shine is a practice of staying curious, of listening to the voices at the margins who have caught a glimpse of liberation beyond our fixed imagination.

Today is World Communion Sunday a day to celebrate our oneness in Christ with all of our siblings around the world. Through Communion, we practice of dwelling within the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, and the magnitude of Grace offered to us through Christ's sacrifice. As we receive the cup and loaf we are invited to wonder with curiosity where Christ our anchor is calling us to go, where Christ our anchor is calling us to let go, and how our convictions can invite others into liberation through God. Amen.