

Philippians 3:4b-14 N.T. 187 (NRSV)

^{4b}If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:
⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;
⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More 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 ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:4b-14
“God’s Lost & Found Department”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Gracious God, we gather this morning to worship you in Spirit and in truth and to have our faith renewed. Through the power of your Holy Spirit may we hear your Word of Life today. In Jesus’ Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: **Once there was a pillar** of a local church who had died and stood before the pearly gates of heaven seeking admission. Saint Peter, the gate keeper, asked the local-church-pillar the same question he asks everyone else, **“Why should you be allowed to enter into heaven?”** The pillar of the local church answered, **“Because I’ve been indispensable in my service to my church. I’ve served in every capacity imaginable. I taught Sunday school for over 50 years. I served as chair of Church Council for at least 20. I’ve always tithed ever since I was a little child receiving a weekly allowance. In fact, I’ve even made generous donations to help the victims of all kinds of natural disasters. Oh, and I never spoke out against any of our pastors, well at least not in public anyway. So I’ve done my part as a pillar of the church; for years I’ve held the place up.”**

Saint Peter is duly impressed, but he still turns to **his boss** for a nod of approval before allowing the local-church-pillar to enter through those pearly gates. The church-pillar strains to see Peter’s boss but can’t quite make out who he is. Peter’s boss looks over at the local-church-pillar and then carefully checks in a large, dusty, old ledger book. Finally Peter’s boss looks up from the book and says to the local-church pillar standing at the gates, **“To tell you the truth, I don’t know you. Go ahead Peter, close the gates!”** **With that,** there was weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth outside of heaven.

PAUSE

Move I.

Some people are counting on their religiosity. Now there's a word most of you don't hear too often, "**Religiosity.**" Religiosity means "**exaggerated piety or religious zeal.**" It's when you're being religious to impress somebody. People who are counting on their religiosity figure that the more faithful they are in practicing their religion **the better things will bode for them** when they have to stand before their maker on the last day. They're usually out to impress other people and they hope that in the process they'll impress God too.

Our Bible lesson today opens with the Apostle Paul defending his teachings **against opponents** whose main interests are in maintaining the customs of Judaism. Paul's opponents want everyone to get the details of their religious practices right. In the opening verses, Paul is waving his own credentials when it comes to defending Judaism. Paul's saying that when it comes to being a "Jew," he could hang with the best of `em. **In Philippians 3:4b-6 (NRSV)** Paul says, "**If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.**" Paul had been initiated into Judaism in the right way. Paul had been born into the right family. Paul had followed all of the right rules, and he was even fighting for the right cause. No one had bragging rights over Paul when it comes to being Jewish. **Paul was a "good" Jew**, or maybe I should say a "great" Jew in every respect.

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Did you hear the echoes of Paul's boasts as the pillar-of-the-church ticked off his list of accomplishments as he stood at the pearly gates of heaven? Paul was bragging because he was a **"good" Jew**, and the church pillar was bragging because he was a **"good" Christian**. If religion is all about adhering to the "right" religious beliefs and doing the "right" religious practices, then Paul and the local church pillar should have it made. Their religiosity is front and center and clearly on display for all to see.

Are you counting on your religiosity too? **Are you counting on** your having been baptized at the right time and in the right way? **Are you counting on** believing in the right beliefs? **Are you counting on** God being impressed by all of the jobs you've done in the church? **Yes, some people are counting on their religiosity.**

End I.

Move II.

But after all, all any of us can really count on is God's grace. Religiosity isn't getting anyone anywhere. The Apostle Paul came to this realization in a most unexpected way. **In those days Paul** was still known as Saul. And Saul was determined to maintain the purity of his religion so he was persecuting these new-fangled Christians who were corrupting Judaism. Here, Saul watches fellow Jews stone a Christian. **Then one day**, as Saul was traveling toward Damascus, he was stopped dead in his tracks by a bright and blinding light. Luke recounts this astounding event in **Acts 9:3-5 (NRSV)** where he writes: **“Now as [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’”** To our knowledge Saul had never spoken with Jesus before. As far as Saul was concerned Jesus was dead and Jesus' followers were all a bunch of delusional malcontents. Saul certainly wasn't looking for Jesus as he scurried along that road towards Damascus to root out more Christians.

What's so amazing about the Damascus Road story is that Saul wasn't looking for Jesus when he encountered him. To use modern terminology, Saul wasn't a **“seeker.”** Granted he may have been seeking Christians, but he certainly wasn't seeking Christ. No, Saul was actually out to rid the earth of Christians and their silly teachings about Jesus. Saul's mind was set on persecuting the followers of Jesus **when he unexpectedly came face-to-face** with the risen Christ on that road to Damascus. Saul wasn't seeking Jesus, no, **Jesus was seeking Saul!** Talk about turning on a dime, **one moment Saul** is on his way to persecute Christians **and the next moment** he's on his way to join them.

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Think for a moment about some conspicuously missing details about Saul's conversion. These are details that we all expect to be part of everyone's conversion but they aren't part of Saul's. As I've already pointed out, Saul wasn't a religious "**seeker.**" Saul already had a religion and he was intent on defending it. So it is conspicuous that Saul didn't see himself as a sinner in need of forgiveness. **Saul never prayed** the sinner's prayer to invite Jesus into his heart. So, the actions that we've all come to associate today with conversion are conspicuously missing in Saul's conversion. But nonetheless, **Saul did encounter the risen Christ** on the road to Damascus and his life was forever changed. **Saul** was **renamed Paul** and went on to be the formative theologian of Christianity as we all know it today. The key to understanding Saul's conversion is to recognize that Jesus found Saul; it wasn't the other way around. Saul didn't even know he was lost, when Jesus found him.

I've titled today's message "***God's Lost & Found Department.***" You don't even need to know that you're lost to be found by Jesus. No human lost and found department could ever be that efficient. **Saul was lost**, hopelessly so, and he didn't even know it. But Jesus found him. **How's that for grace?** Nothing could have been more underserved than the conversion of Saul. But by God's grace God planned to save Saul and **make him Paul**, the author of the greater part of the New Testament. You can try to count on your religiosity. **But after all, all Saul, and any of us, can ever truly count on is God's grace.**

End II.

Move III.

So, Jesus Christ finds the lost. Jesus came to earth to seek that which was lost as an extension of God's grace. **In Luke 19:10 (NRSV)** we're told "**For the Son of Man, [that's Jesus,] came to seek out and to save the lost.**" So simply put you could say that **Jesus' mission** was that of a "*seeker*" and a "*finder*." That which Jesus seeks, Jesus finds.

All of this talk of seeking and finding reminds me of a little ditty that we all learned as young kids: "**Finders Keepers, Losers Weepers.**" I guess this little ditty teaches us that it's far better to be a finder than a loser. After all, losers who don't find what they've lost end up weepers. Before you dismiss this as just a bunch of childish foolishness, let me give you the more sophisticated grown up way of saying the same thing, "**possession is nine-tenths of the law.**" Whoever finds is going to get to keep. **Yet deep down** we all still continue to think that it's somehow unfair when losers aren't finders.

As we've already said "*God's lost & found department*" doesn't work like its human counterparts. **In "God's Lost & Found Department" the finder is always the keeper but the losers are never the weepers.** Jesus talks about this in **Matthew 10:39 (NRSV)** where Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "**Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.**" Are you confused yet? Being lost and being found **all depends upon your point-of-view.** **If you consider something worthless,** you can become separated from it, and yet you don't consider it to be lost. For example, each week we all take things that are ours and we set them out for the garbage man to come and take away. Is your trash sitting in the garbage dump lost? Not really. You can only lose that which is of value to you.

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In our Bible lesson today, Paul has had a change in his point-of-view. Listen to Paul in **Philippians 3:7-8 (NRSV)** where he writes “**Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider 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.**” What Paul once saw as valuable is now worthless to him. **Paul has passed** through “*God’s Lost & Found Department,*” and now **Paul has a new point-of-view.** Now Paul’s finder is his keeper. Paul is kept by Jesus Christ and he certainly isn’t weeping for that which he has lost. **In fact, Paul’s overjoyed** to have been found by Jesus Christ, his keeper. So, in **Philippians 3:12 (NRSV)** Paul presses on “**to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**”

Has Jesus Christ taken hold of you? Have you passed through “**God’s Lost and Found Department**” too? Let go of your worthless past and press onto toward the future that Jesus Christ found you for. **Then with the great hymn writer John Newton,** you too can sing, “*I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.*” Encountering Jesus Christ—**being found by him**—forever changes your point-of-view. **So yes, Jesus Christ does find the lost.**

End III.

Conclusion: Like that pillar of the local church trying to get into heaven, **some people are counting on their religiosity.** There will be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth when they hear the words, “*I don’t know you.*” **After all, all any of us can really count on is God’s grace.** Saul didn’t even know he was lost, when he unexpectedly encountered Jesus on that road to Damascus. But Saul’s encounter of the risen Lord forever changed Saul’s point-of-view. **So, Jesus Christ does find the lost.** In “*God’s Lost and Found Department*” the finder is always the keeper, but the losers are never the weepers. **Perhaps like Paul,** you’re lost and don’t even know it. My prayer today is that **you’ll be un-expectantly found by Jesus too.**

Closing Prayer: Let’s pray. God of Grace and God of glory, you come to us un-expectantly, but you do come. May the Lord Jesus Christ continue on his mission to seek and save that which is lost, **Amen!**

Communion: “*The Great Thanksgiving*” On Screen and See Insert

10:30: Closing Hymn: “*Take My Life and Let it Be...*” Red Hymnal 399
All Three Verses

Sending Forth: Have you been found by Jesus? Then let Jesus take your life and consecrate it for God’s service. Go forth and take hold of that for which Jesus Christ has taken hold of you. **And all of God’s people said...Amen!**