# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

**“What Am I Holding On To?”**

**Philippians 3:5-14**

**October 4, 2020**

When I was 15 years old, I went to an adventure camp in the Pikes Peak mountain range above Colorado Springs. There were many challenging activities at the camp, but the one that concerned me the most was the rock climb. On the fateful day we assembled at the foot of the 200-foot cliff face and all too soon it was my turn. I was fastened into the safety harness, attached to the belaying rope, and I began to climb. I made it about 50 feet up the rock wall when I froze. I couldn’t move. I was paralyzed by fear and dug my fingers and toes as deeply into the rock as I could. The instructor called up to me: “Let go of the rock. The rope will hold you – you won’t fall.” “You’ve got to be kidding,” I thought, “I’m not letter go of this rock!” It took a while for him to convince me but finally I tried it. Bit by bit I took the pressure off my hands and feet and allowed the rope to pick up the weight. Finally, I completely let go. The rope held me, just as had been promised, and I was safely lowered to the ground.

I don’t know if the apostle Paul ever climbed rocks, but he knew a thing or two about letting go of what seemed secure and putting his trust in God. I invite you to turn with me to his letter to the Philippians, 3:5-7

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. I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.

There was a time in Paul’s life when he had great confidence in his ability to live a righteous life before God. Here he expresses confidence in four things about himself: his ancestry, his obedience, his actions, and his morality. He came from good stock – authentic Jewish parents who made sure he was circumcised on the eighth day, as God commanded in the Bible. He belonged to the Jewish sect called the Pharisees who specialized in knowing each and every law in the Bible and obeying them to the letter. He not only believed the right things but he acted on them as well, as evidenced in his zealous persecution of those blasphemers of God known as Christians. And, he was so morally upright that no one was able to find fault in him. Paul had great confidence in himself.

Then Paul experienced an amazing reversal that changed his whole life. His confidence in his own righteousness and religious accomplishments was shown to him to be worthless for his salvation when, on the road to Damascus, he met Jesus Christ and understood for the first time that to be right with God depended not on him but on the freely given grace of God in Jesus Christ. His salvation depended not on what he had done but on what Christ had done. Let’s return to Paul’s letter in verses 8-11

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. 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, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

Before Paul could accept Christ, he had to let go of those things in which he had placed his confidence. He did let go of them, not because they were wrong in and of themselves, but because his confidence in them was wrong. Compared to knowing Christ, they were worthless. Compared to experiencing the power of Christ, they were garbage. Compared to experiencing the resurrection from the dead, living this life trying to impress God and others with his accomplishments was a pursuit he was willing to discard.

Paul had his list of things that he had thought made him a worthwhile person, a list he was willing to give up in order to accept Christ completely by faith. You and I have lists, as well. Perhaps faithful attendance at church is on our list, or good Christian behavior, or adherence to sound moral principles, or particular points of view with regard to politics or the economy or the environment. And, in and of themselves, all of the things on our personal list may be good. But as soon as we begin to hold them up as evidence for why we should be saved, as soon as we begin to flaunt them before others as why we are better than them and therefore deserve God’s special consideration, our list becomes deadly – to ourselves and to others. Like Paul, we need to let go of our confidence in them.

Paul concludes this part of his letter by making it clear that although he has let go of confidence in his list, he has not done so perfectly. Verses 12-14

I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

For each one of us there will always be the temptation to hold on to our lists. Like my hesitancy to let go of the rock and trust the rope, we find it difficult to believe that God really does have a firm hold on us regardless of what we have accomplished. Paul’s encouragement to us is to keep at it. Yes, we will fail. Yes, we will freeze up and find ourselves holding on to things on our list rather than trusting God. But, Paul says, forget past failures and look forward to what lies ahead. Press on, keep learning how to let go of faith in yourself, and you will receive the heavenly prize through faith in Christ.