

The Great Reversal  
Philippians 3:4-14  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
October 8, 2017  
Rev. Glen Bell

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

The Apostle Paul was in prison as he was writing to the church in Philippi, a Macedonian city on one of the main roads from East and West in the Roman Empire.

“I want to know Christ,” he writes, because that relationship, that experience is more valuable than anything else. I want to know Christ. In his grace and strength, all my earthly achievements *and* challenges pale in comparison. I want to know Christ, so I forget what lies behind me, and I push forward into God’s future.

That’s how it was when eleven men and women founded this congregation in 1906. From a worldly perspective, they had few resources and limited prospects. It took almost five years to complete their first sanctuary. They struggled to pay the mortgage and conclude the work. During this period, one leader wrote, “Our church building is not finished. There are no windows yet, but the openings are covered with burlap and we worship there every Sunday morning. The floor is partly sealed and we have chairs for the whole floor, but we do not want to place them because rain from the windows may injure them. Still, we have about forty seats through the middle; we have an excellent organ and plenty of hymnals.”

How did they move forward? Step by step, trusting that God’s presence was just there. Why did they move forward? Because they wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Three decades later in 1939, our church hosted an ecumenical missionary assembly, which was also meeting throughout the state. There were two presentations on Thursday evening, three on Friday morning, two on Friday afternoon, and two on Friday evening – and that doesn’t include the others at Sarasota High School and the city auditorium. The speakers included the Presbyterian president of Davidson College, an Episcopal priest from the Philippines, a Methodist bishop from India, a college student from China, and an American medical missionary recently returned from the Far East.

Why did this American missionary travel so far and risk well-being? Why did that Indian bishop and Chinese college student boldly declare their faith, a faith that may have painfully separated them from friends and family? Because they wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

(I have a Sunday morning worship bulletin from back then, seventy-five years ago. Bob Kimbrough’s father sang a solo, and Caroline Kennedy was elected as one of the officers of our youth group.)

That church, our church, grew and built a new sanctuary here on Oak Street, and then yet another new sanctuary. That church, our church, endured through the discouragement of land busts and Great Depression and World War II, when Lowry Bowman, the pastor, was away for years serving as a chaplain in the army. How did they grow? How did they flourish? How did they keep going through it all?

Step by step. Because they wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

First Presbyterian Church became a great church. Its measure? The ways it served and assisted and gave itself away. Our congregation joyfully participated in the founding or the preservation of a host of other Presbyterian churches – Bee Ridge, Pine Shores, Whitfield, Northminster, Siesta Key, Peace, and others.

There is a great spiritual hunger in our hearts. We long for joy and life and laughter, for meaning and purpose. There is this great yearning deep down in our bones. What can lift us up through hurricanes and earthquakes and the scenes of our neighbors suffering from Immokalee to Puerto Rico to Houston to Las Vegas to Biloxi?

We need Jesus Christ. In him, we discover love and light and peace. We discover a life that triumphs over the darkness and death that surrounds us.

One of my friends served two small congregations in eastern North Carolina after he was first ordained. He tells this story. “There was a teacher that everyone called Miss Frances. She was the third grade lead teacher in the county school. She knew everyone and everyone knew her. More than anything else, she wanted the children of the community to know God and to know Christ’s love for them. She was especially concerned for those children that did not have a church home. While we were there, she started a junior choir at the church. Every Wednesday after school, she loaded up her wood paneled station wagon with children from all over the community. She brought them to church for choir.

“Many of these children were from troubled homes. I remember one young boy named Kenny. His father was dead and his brother was in prison. His mother struggled to make ends meet. He was just at the point of getting into trouble at school and in the community. There were times when it did not seem like we were getting through to him. The frustrations seemed to outweigh the effort.

“One day I asked Miss Frances why she continued to go back week after week to encourage this young boy. I wondered why she didn’t just give up. She said, ‘I believe God has a purpose for Kenny’s life, and it’s my job to help him find it. I have to believe that he will be influenced more by what we do here and what he sees here for a few hours a week than by what he sees at home and does around the neighborhood. I believe that the people of the church who love him will help him see Jesus.’”

We want to know Christ. We want others to know Christ. Like Miss Frances, we are blessed in order to be a blessing. So we give ourselves over, we give ourselves up, we give ourselves away, even more of our time and talents and treasure to the glory of God.

We move forward, step by step, trusting that God’s presence is just there, just there ahead of us.

Our session and stewardship ministry team are excited about our new plans for 2018 for children and youth ministry, for music ministry, for our staff, and for our newly renovated facility. I hope you will learn more in these next two weeks, as we approach Stewardship Commitment Sunday that we may step forward together into the new year.

Dave Carver is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights, Pennsylvania. Several years ago, he participated in a pastor exchange with the Presbyterian Church of Malawi. For six weeks, Pastor Ralph M’nensa and his wife enjoyed the experience of being with them in greater Pittsburgh. Then, Dave Carver and his family travelled to Malawi. He tells this story.

“One morning we traveled to a Prayer House of the Chinkwezule Church, on top of the Chaone plateau. I asked Pastor M’nensa, ‘How will we get there?’ He explained we’d drive to the bottom of the hill and walk to the top, as there are no roads.

“Just after daybreak, we arrived at the bottom, where elders and deacons from the Prayer House greeted us. We started off, climbing upward, with a tin of biscuits and some water. ‘How long will this take?’ I asked. ‘Not long. About twenty minutes,’ was the answer.

“After an hour, we paused and drank water. ‘Are we close?’ ‘Ah, yes. It is *tatsala pango’no kufika*. It is just there.’

“An hour later, we arrived on the hilltop. There was no Prayer House in sight. I said, ‘There doesn’t seem to be any building around here. Is it close?’

“An elder pointed, ‘Do you see that baobab tree? It is *tatsala pango’no kufika*. It is just there.

“We came to the baobab tree. It was hot. The biscuits and water were gone. There was no Prayer House. As I started to ask my question, my escort interrupted. ‘Do you see those goats playing? it is *tatsala pango’no kufika*. It is just there.’ Yeah, sure, I thought.

“After more than two and a half hours of climbing, we came to the Prayer House. By that time, I was not feeling particularly holy. [But] before worship, I learned the congregation had not seen a pastor for nearly three years. During our daylong worship, we baptized babies and children. We

solemnized marriages. We ordained officers. We consecrated the Women's Guild uniforms. We celebrated the sacrament of communion. It was a wonderful, hope-filled celebration of the kingdom of God.

"For the entire hike, I kept hearing '*tatsala pango'no kufika* – it is just there.' To be honest, I had wondered if we would ever see the Prayer House. But all along the way, people pointed out signs to me. A tree. Some goats. A stream. Each sign meant something to my guide, that we were getting closer.

"Each sign, my friends, is a sign that the realm of God is coming. I keep climbing because I have partners on the trip."

We keep climbing, because we want to know Christ. We keep climbing and serving and giving thanks and offering ourselves because we know the power of Christ's resurrection. We strain forward to what lies ahead, step by step, trusting that the resurrection life is before us, just there.

That's the funny thing. As we look back and as we move forward, we discover that we encounter Christ and his power on the journey itself. We discover Jesus Christ, as we build a sanctuary, as we welcome missionaries, as we reach out to Kenny and all the other children and youth, as we walk up the long hill to the Prayer House.

We discover Christ and his power as we forgive, as we serve and lead and pray, as we share the great good news and work for justice and peace. We discover Christ as we give ourselves away, our time, our talents, our treasure, our hearts.

Paul writes, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection."

Today, what is your yearning? How deeply do you want to know?