

# We Belong

Philippians 3:4b-14  
Notes from the pulpit of  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
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If you're applying for college, you've got to look the part for the in-person interview. A suit. A tie. Colorful socks. If you're going to the prom, you've got to stand out. The dress. The flowers. The hair. The colorful socks. If you're running for office you take your campaign picture in front of the flag.

Depending on your context, there's a look that's important. A certain background matters. Who you know can help. Being connected will get you places. If I'm trying to get appointed to an important PCUSA Committee, I'd do we'll to drop a few names. *I know the Reverend Joe Lundy!* Surely, that will get me somewhere.

Paul thought he had all of that. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh," he said, "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." He was the perfect Jew.

It's a great resume. Vote for me. Hire me. I'm your man. If you get me to run on your team, we'll be running in high cotton.

Except—

Paul comes to realize that none of that matters. All that matters is Jesus. My righteousness doesn't compare with God's righteousness. I will always fall short of God's glory. I can't earn my way. But I'm connected to Jesus. By God's grace, Jesus is my friend, my champion, my savior.

The life, death, resurrection, and friendship of Jesus give Paul a reason to examine himself. He discovers that his will isn't perfect (Romans 3). He discovers that despite his supposed righteousness, sin has a hold on him, on his intentions, on his actions. The world's corruption and brokenness has rubbed off on me. My will isn't pure. I am influenced by self-interest. Wasn't it Paul who held the coats of the zealots who stoned Stephen? Paul discovers his resume isn't perfect after all.

Paul is right not to cling to his resume. He is right, instead, to cling to his friend, Jesus. For Paul, there is no greater power than the power of God in Jesus Christ. There is no higher authority. There is no greater goal. There is no holier walk. Nothing else matters. Paul tells the church at Philippi, "I press on to make [my goal of being like Jesus] my own, **because** Christ Jesus has made me his own."

Paul was, likely, in prison when he wrote these words to the church at Philippi. His seersucker suit from Brooks Brothers is torn. His resume is covered in mustard stains. Nobody invited him to the prom. His 401K went belly up. But none of that matters. Because he's connected to Jesus, he is a rich, rich man. And Paul is not worried about what will happen. As a disciple, he's been invited to do important work in the world. Whether he lives or dies, he belongs to God. This belonging makes all the difference to Paul.

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I'm borrowing a story from Michael Lindvall now, which I've told before. All the good stories get rubbed smooth by the retelling...

Mildred Cory doesn't feel like she belongs. Not anymore.

The pastor finds her crying at the church one afternoon. She had come to pray, alone. And to cry.

Through her tears she tells the pastor that she had a new grandson and that she was thinking about his baptism. The pastor tells her to have Tina and her husband give him a call to make arrangements. Baptisms are good news. But why the tears, the pastor wanted to know.

"Tina's got no husband," Mildred said. "She's eighteen, was confirmed in this church just four years ago . . . she started to see this older boy." She hesitated and then the rest of the story came tumbling out. "She got pregnant and Jimmy joined the Air Force and she decided to keep the baby and she wants to have him baptized here, in her church, but she's nervous to come talk to you."

When a child is baptized in this small church, it is the custom for all the blood family to stand with the child. It's a big deal. A real celebration. The Aunts stand. The uncles, grandparents, cousins, siblings.

Tina was nervous. She was nervous because the only family she had in town was her mom. And no family from out of town was going to come. The family had disowned Tina. There would be no grandparents. No Cousins. The baby's father wouldn't even come.

And Tina was nervous. Tina was nervous because she thought her resume didn't measure up. Unlike the Apostle Paul, she didn't have the credentials. She wasn't worthy.

The Session agreed, but never said so. At the Session meeting, Angus McDowell, mister-we've-never-done-it-this-way-before, kept shaking his head, saying over and over again: A teenaged, unwed mother? A father who would be a no-show? The Session did approve the baptism, but commented that Tina's circumstances sadly didn't fit the norm.

The day arrived. An elder announced, "Tina Corey presents her son for baptism." Down the aisle she came, nervously, shaking slightly with month-old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. Everybody hurt for her. For Tina. For Tina's baby.

The minister asked, 'Who stands with this child?'

Mildred, Tina's mother, stood up all by herself and took her place next to Tina and little Jimmy.

The pastor began to ask Tina the baptismal questions, when he became aware of disruptive movement in the pews. He looked up. Angus McDowell had stood up in his blue serge suit, Minnie beside him. Then a couple other elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday School teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy" (p. 168-175) and his mom and grandmother.

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We all belong to God. God loves and welcomes everyone. And God calls us to stand up for one another.

And here we are. Standing alongside Mildred, Tina, and little Jimmy. We are standing with the Angus McDowells and the Minnie McDowells celebrating and affirming that we belong to God, that, by God's grace, we are related to one another, and that God stands with us.

Paul knew this has nothing to do with his resume.

Paul tells the church at Philippi, "I press on to make [my goal of being like Jesus] my own, **because** Christ Jesus has made me his own." Put another way, "Look," Paul says, "I am reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me." AMEN