



Who knows how he and she got together,  
 but get together they did.  
 They prepare excitedly for their wedding day.  
 The day comes,  
 and the wedding is as perfect as their love seems to be.  
 He and she love each other, and commit their lives to each other.  
 They are secure in their commitment.  
 They are secure in one another's love:  
*I am yours and you are mine.*  
 And then, once the wedding day is passed,  
 the commitments spoken,  
 the ink dried on the certificates,  
 he and she stop putting any effort into the relationship –  
 no more energy, no more attention:  
*Why bother?*  
*We know we're committed to each other.*  
*We're secure in each other's love and promises.*  
*So we're done, right?*  
*That's all we have to do, right?*

For the third week in a row now,  
 our *Second Reading* has come from Paul's letter to the Philippians.  
 We've been ignoring these readings and focusing on the gospel.  
 Now it's time for Philippians to take our attention.  
 This young church in Philippi –  
 Paul has a wonderful relationship with them.  
 They really seem to get the gospel.  
 They're on the same page with Paul.  
 And this letter is solid, clear, and full of joy.

There are some confusing spots, however.  
 We hit one last week:  
 Paul, who is always so clear and so insistent  
 that we cannot save ourselves,  
 that we cannot earn our standing before God,  
 that we can never get ourselves right with God –  
 not by walking the right walk,

not by saying the right words,  
 not by the right religious feelings,  
 not by anything that you and I can pull off --

[Paul spend half of Romans, most of Galatians,  
 and parts of several other letters trying to say this loud and clear:  
 It is all sheer gift!  
 God saves us.

God, in the person of his son Jesus, carries us on the cross,  
 carries everything,  
 cancels our debt,  
 breaks our chains,  
 welcomes us home to open arms,  
 and asks us simply to trust him.]

Paul, who is always so clear and so insistent  
 that we are brought home by grace, through faith, because of Christ,  
 now, all of a sudden, says:

**Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.<sup>2</sup>**

Lutheran stomachs take a sudden lurch at that point:

Wait just a minute:

That sounds like we're actually supposed to do something.

Watch out for that works-stuff!

There's nothing we can do!

Paul had just quoted that marvelous hymn of the Servant Christ,  
 who "humbled himself and became obedient unto death,  
 even death on a cross."

He told us, "This mind, this heart –

the heart and mind of the Servant Christ –

is the mind you, too, are called to have and to live out.

So now, in Christ,

**Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.**

Paul doesn't say,

*Earn your own salvation.*

He doesn't say,

*Achieve your own salvation.*

He doesn't say,

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<sup>2</sup> Phil 2.12

*Accomplish your own salvation.*

What he says is, *Work it out.*

*Here it is: It's yours.*

*Jesus has already rescued you.*

*He has already bought you and made you his own.*

*Jesus has already saved you and forgiven you.*

*Now – work it out.*

It's almost as though he had handed us a lump of clay or putty, and said, *Here. This is yours.*

*Work it.*

*Press it into all the cracks and fissures.*

*Work it into your skin.*

*Mold it to yourself. Mold yourself to it.*

*Work it into every facet of your lives.*

*Just – work it.*

And then he adds:

*The only way this works, is that **God is at work – both in your willing and in your doing.***<sup>3</sup>

*God is doing it in you!*

This is one of those classic narrow roads with a ditch on each side, ditches that we keep falling into.

This is one of those horses that we try to ride, and keep on falling off on one side or the other.

Don't sweat it: It's part of being human.

### **The ditch on the one side:**

The deep ingrained assumption that we all carry – seems to be hard-wired into us – that it's really finally up to us to get this right, and that, if we get it right – behave right, believe right, think right, walk right – God will accept us, and if we don't – if we slip up too much – God will give up on us, reject us, turn his back on us.

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<sup>3</sup> 2.13

We're in that first ditch

whenever we think we've been pulling it off pretty well lately,  
whenever we unconsciously take stock and think,  
*I'm doing okay.*

We're in that ditch

whenever we find ourselves looking around us  
and evaluating other folks,  
unconsciously keeping score and figuring we come out ahead.

We're in that ditch

whenever we don't measure up,  
whenever something in the pit of our stomach nags at us  
because we know what others maybe don't know:  
that we've done that  
or failed to do this,  
and so we're hounded by a sense of dread.

In today's reading from Philippians, Paul hits that first ditch pretty squarely!

He does it by trotting out his own list of credentials.

What would your list of credentials be?

Not the list you might have in your conscious brain,  
but the unexamined list that's woven into your guts?

What's the list of credentials

that makes you feel that you're really okay with God and with others?

Or what's the list of credentials that would make you feel secure  
if only you felt you truly measured up?

- Is it that you try to live out an exemplary Christian life?
- Is it that you are an upstanding moral person?
- A good citizen?
- Is it that you're really firm on what you believe, and where you stand?
- Is it that you're engaged in issues of social justice?
- Is it that you are environmentally conscious?
- Is it your church involvement? Your life of worship, service, Bible study, and prayer?
- Is it that you're a really, genuinely nice and thoughtful person?
- Is it that you make lefse, and actually like lutefisk?

Paul trots out his credentials –

his heritage, his pure blood, his religious training,  
 his party affiliation, his commitments,  
 his flawless achievement in following God's law! (*That's what he says!*)  
 his persecution of this heretical Jesus movement.

Paul had it all.

And then he turns around and says,

*I've come to put all of it in the loss column.*

*I've come to see all of it as nothing but rubbish, garbage, excrement,  
 compared with the marvelous gift  
 of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!<sup>4</sup>*

As *Lutheran* Christians,

we've worked really hard on recognizing that first ditch.

As *Lutheran* Christians,

we rehearse our understanding of **justification by grace through faith**  
 all the time.

At the same time,

all we have to do is notice that feeling of dread in the belly,  
 and we know that we need to keep hearing the gospel word  
 over and over:

***I love you.***

***I take you on my cross.***

***I forgive you.***

***You are mine.***

For me, the line that does it for me,

the words that get through to me – this time around –  
 are these words from Paul:

**because Christ Jesus has made me his own.<sup>5</sup>**

**Then there's the ditch on the other side of the road:**

We work so hard as Lutherans –

We work so hard are reminding ourselves that we're saved by grace,  
 not by our own achievement,

we work so hard at that side of the story,

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<sup>4</sup> 3.8

<sup>5</sup> 3.12b.

that we can convince ourselves  
 that we're not supposed to do anything at all.  
 And so it catches us by surprise when Paul says,  
**Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.**  
 Or in today's reading, when Paul says,  
**I press on to make it my own,  
 because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**

So imagine a marriage.  
 Who knows how he and she got together,  
 but get together they did.  
 They prepare excitedly for their wedding day.  
 The day comes,  
 and the wedding is as perfect as their love seems to be.  
 He and she love each other, and commit their lives to each other.  
 They are secure in their commitment.  
 They are secure in one another's love:  
*I am yours and you are mine.*  
 And then, once the wedding day is passed,  
 the commitments spoken,  
 the ink dried on the certificates,  
 he and she stop putting any effort into the relationship –  
 no more energy, no more attention:  
*Why bother?  
 We know we're committed to each other.  
 We're secure in each other's love and promises.  
 So we're done, right?  
 That's all we have to do, right?*

On the contrary, for Paul,  
 it's precisely because we are so solidly anchored in the love of Jesus Christ,  
 it's precisely because we know we are loved and forgiven in Christ,  
 it's precisely because of that,  
 that we can now put all our energy into this gift:  
*I haven't arrived,* says Paul.  
*I haven't yet grown up into the love that Jesus has for me.*  
*I haven't yet arrived at maturity in Christ.*

*I haven't yet been fully shaped into the image of Christ.*

**But I press on to make it my own,  
because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**

Conversion happens in lots of different ways.

Paul's own conversion is the classic example of a sudden 180-degree turn-around:

One day, he's a persecutor of Christians.

Suddenly Christ confronts him, stops Paul in his tracks,

and within a few short days Paul is baptized

and begins to proclaim the very faith he tried to destroy.

But that was only the beginning for Paul:

Paul's sudden conversion was only the doorway,

the entrance into a whole lifetime of conversion, of change, of growth.

I don't know about you, but for myself:

the older I get, and the longer I walk with Christ,

the more deeply I see my own brokenness.

The longer I walk with Christ,

the more sinful and flawed I know I am.

And the longer I walk with Christ,

the more amazed I am at his love, his forgiveness, his salvation.

I haven't arrived.

I am so far from anything that looks like arriving.

**But (says Paul) I press on to make it my own,  
because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**

If you've been walking this journey –

if you've been walking with Christ,

knowing that he has made you his own,

and open to him showing you, step by step, new places to grow –

if you've been walking this journey,

then you know that it's sometimes a painful journey:

It hurts to think you're growing really well,

only to have the Spirit show you some hidden garbage

you never wanted to see.

Paul names it this way:

**I want to know Christ --**

**I want to know the power of his resurrection.**

**I want to know the fellowship of his sufferings,  
being shaped into the shape of his death.<sup>6</sup>**

Christian life, Christian discipleship, Christian growth is sweet but painful:

**being shaped into the shape of his death.**

It's only sweet because it's all anchored in Jesus' love and Jesus' promise:

**I press on to make it my own,**

**because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**

If you've been walking this journey –

if you've been walking with Christ,

knowing that he has made you his own,

and open to him showing you, step by step, new places to grow –

if you've been walking this journey,

then you know that it's also **sheer joy!**

It's joy because Christ Jesus has made us his own.

It's joy because our deep anxious question with God has been answered.

It's joy because, in Jesus,

forgiveness and acceptance and embrace is where we live!

It's joy because we never have to wonder – never again --

whether God can possibly love us or accept us.

I don't know which part of Paul's word you're needing today –

whether you're needing to hear,

**Christ Jesus has made me his own,**

or whether that part you're needing is,

**I press on to make it my own.**

It's dynamic, this life we share in Jesus Christ.

He is in the process of shaping us, our whole life long.

We will never – at any point in this earthly life of ours –

we will never have arrived.

There will always be new things to learn –

new blind spots in our compassion and our discipleship –

that the Spirit will want to uncover.

There will always be new chapters,

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<sup>6</sup> V. 10

new corners to work the putty into,  
new designs to paint,  
new ways to build with our Legos,  
new old hurts to discover and offer up for healing,  
new ways that we'll be invited to grow.

In this life, we will never have arrived.

But Christ Jesus has made us his own!

The central question of our lives is settled in Jesus' cross!

It's only because we know that –

because we're anchored in him –

it's only because he has made us his own

that we can press on to make it our own.

Amen