

Philippians 3:3-14 “What Are We Doing Here Anyway?”

So you might be asking, “When did you have time to prepare a sermon this week?” Well I’ve got to confess. This sermon has been building and forming in my head all week like ... like ... a super-cell storm that forms over a city and dumps five inches of rain in three hours. Too soon? Probably too soon. But sometimes you’ve just got to laugh at the absurdity of life, right? The most important thing is that we are here, together as a loving community of faith worshipping in this sanctuary. I said this last November, and I’ll say it again. “God did not do this to us.” God doesn’t work that way. We didn’t do anything to deserve this. Stuff ... just ... happens. It’s just that Butte County has had a *lot* of stuff happening lately.

See, I looked at this scripture that I picked all the way back in March and I thought, “You know what? This still applies.” So let’s run with it and see where it takes us. The word is brought to us this morning by the Apostle Paul, author of 28% of the New Testament. He wrote several letters to churches in Asia Minor, Turkey, Greece, and other parts of the Roman Empire where Jews and Gentiles co-existed and were struggling to come to terms with this new “Jesus movement” that was sweeping across the land. Some of his letters addressed problems that were happening in the church. Other letters were meant to get churches back on track who had lost their way. Others addressed heresies that had come up. This letter to the Philippians that we have in front of us this morning is a word of encouragement to a church who “got it.” That’s why this is my favorite letter. It’s upbeat ... it’s straight to the point ... it’s laced with humor and love. You will not see anything else in the New Testament as encouraging as Paul’s letter to the Philippians. And boy do we need to hear something encouraging this morning, amen?

Let’s talk about the elephant in the room. Tuesday night, probably not an hour after the Board Meeting was adjourned, Chico was hit with a storm

that dumped close to five inches of rain in three hours. And when I say, “Chico,” I’m not talking “Butte County.” I’m talking CHICO. People on the south end of town had no idea what was going on here. Our neighbor, Hal, who is an airline watched the storm build in real time straight overhead. This was ground zero. Our gutters and drainage system here at the church was overwhelmed and blocked by debris and hail, and the waters came in from our playground and court courtyard and seeped into a small corner of the Bethany Room, almost the entire music room, rooms 8, 7 and 6 (but oddly enough, not five), My office, Briony’s office, Pastor Jan’s Office, the bathroom at the corner of the sanctuary, the green room, and that side of the sanctuary from the edge of the piano up to the wall.

So how did I know this happened? Well ... first of all, you could hear the rain and hail pounding on the house. Graham had called and asked if I would be willing to come pick him up at Rite Aid with the truck. He was afraid to take his car out of the relative safety of the parking lot because other cars were stalling out in the water on Mangrove. At the same time, my friend said that her daughter was on the first floor of a three story apartment and rain was coming down through her ceiling and light fixtures and needed help getting her stuff out. So I got Graham, went over to help my friend’s daughter, came back and saw that our street had become a river. So I parked, went inside the house, opened the door to the garage to put my boots away and noticed there was water on the floor. That’s not terribly unusual. But usually it only comes in just a little bit over by where the side door is, but it’s got to be raining REALLY hard for that to happen even a little. That prompted me to think, “If there’s this much water in the garage, I wonder what the church looks like!?” By that time it had stopped raining, so I opened the front doors to the office hallway and noticed the little wooden step up that normally lives by the drinking fountain had floated to the front doors. When I opened the office door, that’s when I found the water-filled rooms. And before you ask, there is no amount of sand bags that we have here onsite that would have prevented this. This was inevitable. I went to the basement thinking that I was going to be standing in water

up to my knees. Nope. Dry as a bone. If I had a broom and swept, I would have choked on the dust. There was no indication that the sump pump had even been triggered. Nothing. This was all about little bitty four inch drainage pipes getting overwhelmed by too much rain coming off our roof. And we weren't the only ones who had this problem. Chico Junior High, Enloe Hospital, several businesses on Mangrove and the Esplanade had water damage too.

The good news is that we were able to get Serve Pro, a water extraction team, onsite the next morning. Considering how infrequently this happens and the number of businesses and homes affected by this storm, we are fortunate to have secured them. The bad news is that water reached the drywall in several rooms. Our facility was built in 1956, which means there are trace amounts of asbestos in the drywall. That means that a hazmat team has to come in and remove the affected drywall in a negative pressure environment so that it can be replaced. This will be a big undertaking. This will involve taking all of the furniture out of the rooms that had water in them and storing them in "pods" while the extraction team takes the old drywall out and the repair team puts new drywall and puts everything back together again. But back to some good news – Dan Richardson, the owner/operator of this region's Serve-Pro, is a former youth pastor who is committed to timing his work so we won't have to worship anywhere other than our sanctuary during the repairs.

What's that line from Young Frankenstein? "It could be worse?" Except, the line from that movie was, "It could be worse, it could be raining." And rain is exactly why we're in the pickle that we're in now. So how does this have anything to do with this passage from Philippians? Paul was trying to tell the Philippians that everything that he had experienced in life up until he encountered Christ ... good, bad, and everything in between, could be counted as loss because of his knowing Christ Jesus.

“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as 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.”

I found out something about that word “rubbish” this last week. The Greek word that most versions translate as “rubbish?” It’s “skubala.” You know what the most accurate translation is for “skubala?” Most English translators chicken out and typically use something ... tamer. I’m even going to chicken out. “Skubala” is sewerage. I learned something else this week. The water that came into our church Tuesday night? It’s sewerage. I thought, “No it isn’t! Sewerage stinks and has ... fecal matter in it. Why would you say it’s sewerage?” Dan from Serve Pro said, “That water comes from the outside. Where do ducks and dogs poop? It’s sewerage.”

So I guess what I’m trying to tell you this morning is that all of this stuff we’ve been through this past week? All of the things that Butte County has been through over the last five and a half months? The bad? The good? The gains? The losses? Everything in-between? When you compare them with knowing Christ, it’s all rubbish. It’s all sewerage. We are in the business of knowing and following Christ here at First Christian Church. Lenten season is supposed to be a time where we spend some extra time and effort to wade through the rubbish and realize what is important and what isn’t important in the big picture. It’s when we examine ourselves. It’s when we decide what is important and then we do it. It’s when we decide what’s not important and we set it aside. It’s a time when we’re supposed to ask, “Is this all really such a big deal?” And the answer, according to Paul is, “No. It isn’t. Not compared to knowing Christ.” I do have to confess, I’m just more accustomed to my Lenten season lessons being a little more *subtle* than this.

So let me tell you how this ... minor crisis ... this “rubbish” will affect the operations of First Christian Church:

Right now, we are operating at about 80%. The computers work. Most of our Wi-Fi network on this side of the church works. Wires in the office have been jiggled and equipment has been moved, so some things are unplugged. For some reason, the phone in the treasurer's office does not work, but the nursery phone does. Go figure. Things are not where they typically are. It may take more time to find some things because a lot of things had to be moved by the water extraction crew. Programs, as far as we can tell, have not been interrupted. We will still have Faith and Films tomorrow in the Fireside Room and the discussion group on Wednesday will meet in the Spiritual Care Center. We may have to shift space around, but all programs will carry on mostly as planned.

We were already stretched thin as far as personnel goes, but now we are especially stretched thin. Our priorities have changed dramatically. The staff's tolerance for skubala like, "There's an error in the bulletin! You used a semi-colon instead of a colon on page five of the Caller" will earn you a blank look. I'm not even going to guarantee that we will have bulletins or newsletters every week for awhile. We're going to have to play the ball where the monkey drops it, right elders? I'll guarantee that none of the staff will have time for things like, "Susie put a fork where the spatulas belong in the kitchen" or "There's a muddy footprint in the hallway by the Bethany Room." We need to rise above the little things and pitch in to help with the big things. We may be asking for some help. We may be asking some folks to step up and do things that are out of your comfort zone. We will certainly need help figuring out how to put everything back together with our wireless network and phones. It's not going to be easy, but I'm confident that we can do it. We once declared that FCC Chico is a fail-free zone. Today I am declaring our sacred space a skubala-free zone. We can do this. Why? Because God is good (all the time), and all the time (God is good.) Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.