

Advent Lutheran Church
Do You Know?
August 24, 2025
Philippians 3:1-14 & Matthew 16:24-25

This week, during a Tuesday morning television interview, President Donald Trump said, "I wanna try and get to heaven if possible. I'm hearing I'm not doing well. I am really at the bottom of the totem pole."¹

To repeat, the American President said, "I wanna try and get to heaven if possible."

This unsolicited and largely unexpected comment was greeted by responses varying from laughter to wonderment to thankfulness.

Later that day the White House Press Secretary shared that she not only believed the President's remark was sincere, but that his aspiration to get into heaven should be shared by everyone in the room.²

Mr. President, I assure you that getting to heaven and experiencing eternal life is possible. And, I think today's readings offer a wonderful place to begin not only for the President, but for all of us here in this room and those joining us online.

This is my penultimate sermon as your interim pastor – and, yes, that's just a fancy word for second to last. It is my final traditional message before I offer parting words next Sunday. So, it is an ideal time to get back to the basics.

This focus on the fundamentals is how we started our fourteen-month journey together. You may remember the first two sermon series I preached here at Advent were The Jesus Priorities and Fruitful Practices. The first was a series on what Jesus said and did and how that should inform what we say and do while the

¹ Kinsey Crowley. "Trump wants to go to heaven for ending the war in Ukraine. What religion is he?," USA Today, August 21, 2025, www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/08/21/trump-heaven/85754921007/

² Meredith Kile. "Trump Says He Wants to 'Try and Get to Heaven if Possible': 'I'm Hearing I'm Not Doing Well,'" August 19, 2025, people.com/trump-says-he-wants-to-get-to-heaven-if-possible-11793929/

second was focused on what it is that followers of the Way of Jesus should do together in the context of their local church.³

And, now, we end as we began, by exploring the basics of the Christian faith.

In Philippians 3, Paul reflects on his own journey. If anyone could have claimed to be “doing well,” it was Paul. He lists his credentials: circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, righteous under the law.

Put in today’s language, Paul was born into privilege. He inherited the right identity, the right connections, and the right social standing. And, over the years, he had played by the system’s rules so well that he found his way to the top of the totem pole.

But now, now Paul is proclaiming loudly that he counts all of his significance – all of his privilege – all of his social status as loss for the sake of Christ. And, he wants the whole world to know that rather than boasting in himself and his former status he now boasts in knowing Christ.

I wonder . . . do you know Christ?

Over the years I’ve met many people who know Jesus, including several who know far more about Jesus than I do. These folks have studied for years and years and know all sorts of fun facts and often major in minor details. They could pass any quiz you might administer. They win every time the “Jesus category” shows up in Jeopardy or Trivial Pursuit.

This is one way of knowing Jesus. It is the path of knowing about Jesus or of being intellectually informed. And, while this is a noble path it falls short of the kind knowing Christ that Paul envisions.

Paul is talking about knowing Christ personally. Paul is referring to an experiential understanding – to a relational reality. This

³ The Jesus Priorities was based on a book by the same title written by Christopher Maricle while the Fruitful Practices was based on a book titled Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations by Robert Schnase.

kind of knowing includes an intellectual component, but also goes well beyond it.

I am grateful I learned a great deal about who Jesus is in confirmation, in my seminary education, and in my personal study in the years since. I also want you to know that this knowledge alone would not have led me to become a Christian nor would it have compelled me to action.

Siblings in Christ, let me testify. Like Paul, I have encountered Jesus. I'm happy to share my own story with anyone at any time!

Because I know Jesus in this experiential and relational way, my whole life has changed. Because Paul knew Jesus in this way, his whole life changed. Hopefully, because you know Jesus in this way, your whole life has changed.

Paul says it clearly in verse 7, "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."

And he goes on to tell everyone who will listen that his transformation means that he is focused on knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection so that he might share in his sufferings, become like him in his death, and somehow attain resurrection. In effect, Paul is all in.

Let me read this section of our Epistle lesson from a modern translation so that nothing gets lost across the centuries:

The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash - along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ.

Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant - dog dung.

I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ - God's righteousness.

I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.⁴

This morning I'm here to ask a single question:

Do you know Christ?

Do you really know Christ? Have you encountered Jesus in such a way that these verses resonate deeply with you and are validated in your lived experience? If so, then the Gospel lesson is a natural next step.

In the 16th chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells us that those who really know him and truly follow him must be willing to act accordingly. When Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me," he is calling us to a life shaped by sacrifice and love, not self-preservation. He is telling us that to know him is to reorder our lives by pouring ourselves out for others, denying our egos, and standing with the vulnerable – even when doing so comes at great personal cost.

Let's return for a moment to President Trump's words. He said he hopes to get into heaven, perhaps by brokering peace. He is hoping to earn God's favor by doing enough good.

But Paul is clear that salvation is not about our achievements, no matter how life changing or world altering they may be. We are not saved by our résumés. We are not saved by what others think of us. We are not saved by how much we've accomplished. We are saved by grace.

⁴ Philippians 3:7-11, The Message

Paul concludes by telling us that he hasn't yet arrived at his goal, however, he chooses to press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him.⁵

Siblings in Christ, I invite you to press on. Press on in your own life of faith. Press on in the shared life here at Advent Lutheran Church. Press on not because it is easy, but because Jesus has taken a hold of you, claimed you as his own, and will never let go.

Amen.

⁵ Philippians 3:12.