

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Wiesman – April 6, 2025
Philippians 3:4b-11 & Galatians 6:14
When Nothing Else Matters

We don't do it the way the Apostle Paul did it. *Brag*, that is. Like: I don't think anyone who has been circumcised would ever see this as something to be especially proud of. No recruiter would ever reach out to you because they heard you'd been and were impressed.

But in the world of the Apostle Paul, being circumcised was very much a source of identity and of pride. (I guess without MICHIGAN or USC sweatshirts to wear, and without Middlebury – future alma mater of baby Piper Pacilio; go Panthers! – and without Middlebury decals to stick to the inside rear car window, I guess you took what you could get.)

What the Apostle Paul wrote to the church, to the Christians, in the ancient city of Philippi – that he “*was 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 (before his conversion), a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless*” – this is the equivalent of his LinkedIn profile. This is the equivalent of his Instagram account, the equivalent of the personal statement he submits with all his college applications, the equivalent of his CV, his résumé. This is who he is. Or, at least, this is who he wants others to think that he is.

We don't do it the way the Apostle Paul did it. *Brag*, that is. But we do it. In socially acceptable ways, much more quietly and subtly, of course, we do it. In fact, the ability to do it quietly and subtly, the ability to brag without being seen as actually bragging, may be the greatest boast of all. I lived in Boston for a while; no one who went to Harvard ever said they went to Harvard. Everyone went to a “small liberal arts college in Cambridge.” Which, you know, somehow always managed to just come up in the first sentence of any conversation, but whatever.

When the show *Succession* – which is about a Rupert-Murdoch-like multi-billionaire media titan's truly terrible family – when the show was airing on HBO, at least once a season, some article would appear in the *New York Times* or in the *Wall Street Journal* about the main characters' sense of style, a trend they called “stealth wealth.” The best example of this was the \$495 blue cashmere baseball hat with no logos or identifiable markings of any kind that one of the guys wore. It was pure *if-you-know-you-know* anti-ostentatiousness ostentatiousness, showing off without showing off. (The comments people posted about this baseball hat were, as you might expect, variations on the theme of “Eat the rich.”)

I once overheard a woman in a coffeeshop in town talking about what, to her, was an infuriating and embarrassing incident: being told she was not dressed acceptably to be seated in whatever restaurant or club or whatever she was trying to get into, because she was wearing workout clothes, like, yoga pants or something; to the untrained eye, she looked too casual and unkempt, and – and she was saying this with absolutely no sense of irony or shame – and she responded to this “slight” by shouting at the poor hostess, “Do you have any idea how much these leggings cost? No, of course you don't!”

We brag differently than the Apostle Paul did, and we brag about different things than the Apostle Paul did: for us, it's education, work, wealth, wellness, appearance. And, on the whole with these things, we show and don't tell. One's status and success, one's accomplishments, one's children's accomplishments – these are gestured toward and not trumpeted. And we all know how that's done.

may be some confusing of humility with false modesty, pretending you're not much of a tennis player when you know perfectly well you are. But it should be said that little if any this is actually bad. My mom drove around with a "My child was student of the month at Gold Canyon Elementary School" bumper sticker on her car and, you know what, God bless her; I don't think that makes her a boastful woman.

Some of what the Apostle Paul bragged about was his own religiosity and virtuousness. I think it's nice when you look at somebody's LinkedIn and you can see the volunteer work they've done. Are they trying to communicate to potential clients or employers that they are a certain type of person? Sure. But at least they've done the volunteer work they've done. It's clear that a lot of kids in town do community service to try to beef up their college applications, but the community is still the better for it. And, anyway, it's impossible to move through the world without presenting *some* image of yourself. Why *not* lead with the best version of who you are?

I am looking out at a church full of people who have very impressive résumés, and whose children all began trying to get into a certain small liberal arts college in Cambridge which shall remain nameless – trying to get in in preschool practically. You have everything going for you. Your kids have everything going for them. It doesn't need to always feel like it for it to be true: But in the eyes of 99% of people on planet earth, you have won at life. You have. And, again, that's not bad. How could that be bad?

But – *but*: One of the things Christianity is supposed to do is complicate your relationship to your own success. One of the things Christianity is supposed to do is relativize all you have and all you have achieved. The Apostle Paul was bragging, until he wasn't: *If anyone else has reason to feel good about themselves, 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. Yet – YET – 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."* The word rubbish sounds almost charming; but the Greek word used there is not a charming word: it is a swear word, it is the word for – pardon my French – for "bullshit."

The Apostle Paul took a look at his life, at everything impressive about it, all his accomplishments, all his achievements, all anyone would see and admire, and he said, he said literally, "Ehh. But who really gives a shit?" Nothing he could brag about felt worth bragging about.

As he wrote again, in another of his letters: *"May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world."* What I

think he was saying is: The best thing about any of us is nothing we can take credit for; it's nothing we have earned or could ever deserve. The best thing about any of us is that we are loved by who we are loved by. First of all by God. And last of all by God. And by all those whose love for us is as much gift to us as God's own love for us is a gift to us. This love, this unconditional love, this love which is given *just because*, is the ground of who we are. It is the solid rock our identities and sense of self and self-worth rest upon. You are loved. And thus, you have it in you to love others. Next to that, nothing else matters. Nothing even that *does* matter matters. Having ambitions, having aspirations, working hard, striving, struggling, making something of yourself, succeeding – that *does* matter, but *it doesn't*. You know?

The distinction David Brooks makes between the “résumé virtues” and the “eulogy virtues” comes to mind. The “résumé virtues” are the skills and talents you bring to the marketplace. They're what show up your LinkedIn profile. The “eulogy virtues” are the things people say about you at your funeral. Were you kind? Generous? Capable of deep love?

The saddest funeral I've ever done wasn't for someone who died tragically or too young; it was for someone at whose service I never once heard the word “love.” Business associate after business associate climbed into the pulpit and talked about what a dealmaker this man was. That was it. His obituary read like a résumé with a birth and death date attached. He was very important and impressive in death, as he no doubt was in life. But who wants to live like that? Who wants to die like that? That is what Christianity is supposed to keep from happening to us.

Brandon and Colby, that is what we promised you we would do for Piper: do our level best to protect her from living a life where what matters is not ever or is not often enough judged against what matters *most*. We are going to tell her it is okay to be different. We are going to tell her it is okay to fail. I know she is the most beautiful baby there has ever been, but even if she weren't, we would tell her that she's beautiful anyway – and we would mean it. We are going to tell her that she doesn't have to be who other people want her to be, doesn't have to be cool or popular. We are going to tell her that if any mean girls come at her in middle school, there will be a whole church of us standing behind her. We are going to tell her – and, I'm sorry, but – we are going to tell her that it really doesn't matter what college she goes to or how much money she makes. What matters more, what matters most, is that she feeds the love in her heart, the love that brought her to you and made her who she is, the love she has received, and the love she gives.