**Resurrection Credentials**

Isaiah 43:16-21
Philippians 3:4b-14

 It never occurred to us that a cat would need so many credentials for traveling to South Korea. Twitch, who by the way got her name after chewing through an electric cord, is my daughter’s companion for her year teaching English. We assumed Twitch might need some type of health verification, but the requirements, the tests and the paper work just kept mounting. After running Erica back and forth a couple times to a discount animal clinic in Chaska, we thought we were finally good to go. Unfortunately, the Federal office in downtown St. Paul that had to put some type of stamp on the forms was closed the week we needed to have it done. We had to pay the extra cost of over nighting the form to Chicago and back, all so that for a mere $125, Erica could get one more stamp of approval for Twitch. With all these required credentials, I rather expect that Twitch will at the very least be able to speak Korean when she gets home.
 In his letter to the people in Philippi, it is clear the Apostle Paul shares a deep frustration with all the credential requirements that he has been encountering. There are some who are insisting that anyone who claims to be a follower of Christ must have their papers in order if they are to be accepted into the community. Among the documentation needed for males is proof of circumcision. In the early church this particular requirement was the source of a heated debate. For some Christians, circumcision of males was an essential requirement for sharing in the covenant given to Abraham and Sarah.

 You can almost hear the frustration in Paul’s voice when it comes to the credentials that some would impose. “You want credentials?” says Paul, “I have credentials. *If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, 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”.* “No one has more religious credentials than me”. Paul is almost starting to sound like Donald Trump. But, then Paul says, “none of that matters to me now. I do not need those religious credentials”.

 It would be easy for us to get on this anti-credential band wagon with Paul. We all know how credential requirements have been and are used to keep citizens of color locked out of the voting booth, shut out of the housing market, frozen out of job opportunities, prevented from entering the best colleges and universities. We all know how gender credentials requirements have been used against women. We have reason to share Paul’s antipathy toward these religious credentials.

But, before we too eagerly sign up for this anti-credential movement, we might want to consider the important role credentials often play. You may recall that it was just a couple of months ago that a young 18 year old in West Palm Beach, Florida by the name of Malachi Robinson was arrested for posing as a Doctor. About a month prior to his arrest he had been busted for masquerading as a doctor in a local hospital. He got away with it for nearly a month until one of the older doctors said, “I’m really getting old because these young doctors look younger every year.” He was suspicious enough to have it checked out. You might think that being found out at the hospital would be it for Malachi, but instead he opened an Ob-Gyn clinic of his own. I am guessing that most women would prefer their Ob-Gyn doctors have some credentials, preferably from an established school of medicine.

Perhaps you remember the movie called “Catch Me If You Can”, starring Leonardo DiCaprio. The movie is based on the true life story of Frank Abignale who before his 19th birthday successfully impersonated a Pam-Am airline pilot, a doctor, an assistant attorney general, and a history professor. Abignale was so good with his impersonations and forgeries that the FBI essentially gave up and instead contracted with him to help catch check forgers. I don’t know about you, but personally when I get on an airplane, I prefer the pilot have some credentials. When I go to the doctor or should I need an attorney, I prefer they have some credentials. If I am spending good money for a college education for myself or my kids, I am counting on the fact that their professors will have some credentials.

This coming week, we will be having a credentialing gathering here at Cherokee Park United Church. Okogyeamon will be going before an Ecclesiastical Council of the United Church of Christ at which Okogyeamon will make a presentation, followed by questions from those gathered. Just getting to this point required Okogyeamon to provide a host of credentials, including a Master of Divinity degree. Following the presentation and questions, the Ecclesiastical Council will vote, providing the final credential Okogyeamon needs in order to be ordained. I may have fooled you all those years, but it’s not that easy to do. Credentials are required for people wanting to serve as your pastor. Just ask the current interim search committee. I can assure you, they are looking at credentials.

The credentials established by the Pharisees, which were in turn being promoted by some early Christians, were created for good reason. Credentials were created by Jewish leaders as a primary way of setting themselves apart from the dominant Roman culture. It was too easy for people to say, “yes I follow the God of Israel”, but then in practice live by the domination norms of Rome. You can compare it to Christians today who cheapen the radical justice oriented Good News of Jesus with a prosperity gospel that says what God really wants is for us all to be wealthy capitalists. The Pharisees were doing their best to maintain the integrity of Judaism, resisting the exploitive and domination cultural values of Rome.

The credentials established by the Pharisees were a means of ensuring that people who claim to be followers of the God of Abraham and Sarah were not imposters, but in practice followers of God. At their best, religious credentials helped people live in faithfulness to the justice claims of the prophets, who continue insisting God is at work in our world. As Isaiah proclaims, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it”? Religious credentials can enable us to recognize the false from the true.

The problem Paul identifies represents the down side of credentials. Credentials can be essential by establishing the means by which we are able to recognize what is true from what is false, what is real from what is an impersonation. Unfortunately as we all know credentials can become an end in and of themselves. None of us wants a doctor, an attorney, a plumber, an electrician or a pastor for that matter who thirties years ago got a diploma or a certificate and who essentially has learned nothing more since. Instead of using the credentials as a starting point for a vocation, the credentials become an end point, making an impressive display on the wall, but little else. Credentials can become a way of puffing ourselves up, showing off our accomplishments. Credentials can become a route to extra privileges, denied to most folks, but made available to those with the right credentials.

Paul bristles at this credentialing process because from his experience the credentials have ceased functioning in the way they were intended, giving witness to the prophetic claims of God’s justice and love in our lives. This is why Paul says, “I now consider all those credentials a loss. They are like rubbish, because I have found something much better.” In the life, death and resurrection of Christ, Paul has rediscovered the true reason these religious credentials were created in the first place. True religious credentials have nothing to do with self-promotion, false efforts to prove our self-worth and value, or special privileges.

For Paul the only religious credentials we need is the assurance and the awareness that we are loved by God for who we are, as we are, without merit. There is nothing we can do to earn those credentials by our great accomplishments. There is no way to put these credentials on a wall or in a plaque. They are a gift revealed in the love of One that death itself is unable to contain. These are resurrection credentials available to anyone who says yes to the radical, justice oriented love of God revealed in Christ and which as the prophet proclaims continues to do a new thing.

It is resurrection credentials that are evidenced in the life of William Kamkwamba, who seeing the needs of his people in Malawi begins imagining a windmill that can bring water to his community and others. It is resurrection credentials at work in One Great Hour of Sharing, making it possible for the church to be present in time of need. It is resurrection credentials that are evident when a meal is shared with a friend or a neighbor, a prayer is offered for healing, a listening ear is provided to someone needing to be heard, a welcome is extended to someone new in our community, a letter is written to a legislator advocating for immigrants. Resurrection credentials are evidenced in the love we share and the justice we proclaim. This is why Paul says, “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus”.
 I have no idea what type of credentials Twitch will need in order to return to Minnesota. I do hope she can speak Korean. Whatever credentials are required for my daughter’s cat, we can rest assured that the credentials we most need are available to us every day.

**Isaiah 43:16-21**

*In our first lesson the prophet Isaiah is speaking to people who live as exiles in Babylonian captivity. Many have done their best to accept things as they are, but there persists an underlying feeling of discouragement and despair. The prophet reminds the people they have solid reason for hope even when it seems there is no way that life will ever change. The God who set them free from slavery is still at work and is once again about to do a new thing for all who are receptive to the ways of God.*

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

**Philippians 3:4b-14**

*In his letter to the Philippians the Apostle Paul enters a debate about what is required to be a follower of Christ. Some argue there are certain preconditions that must be met. Paul is unequivocal with his insistence that the only requirement any of us need has already been revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.*

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, 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 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 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.