

Do You Have Happy Feet?-September 6, 2015
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Do You Have Happy Feet? Philippians 3:4b-14

Our neuroses may be troublesome to others and to us. This might be a whale of an understatement because we often don't identify our obsessions. We are adept at recognizing the fixations of others but our own, not so much.

St. Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is not unique. Our culture's preoccupation with sexuality and the human body makes it difficult to speak of St. Paul's near obsession with circumcision. In the same way, the church's disastrous history of anti-Semitism can make it difficult to consider St. Paul's speeches regarding Judaism. We need to confront these hang-ups, or we will never deal justly with this influential passage.

A seminary professor once told us "A text without a context is a pretext." Paul is penning from prison to a new church in Philippi, warning them to be on alert for dogs who do mutilate evil, St. Paul's understated term for those who insist that to be a Christian you must be circumcised.

Just to be clear: Paul doesn't have a problem with circumcision, only with the idea that God requires it. In essence, Paul is saying "Phooey!" to this the idea that it is God's requirement. Let me go another step. St. Paul is not anti-Semitic, either. We know that he is The-Jew-Among-Jews. Two centuries of history have sometimes attempted to show him as against God's chosen people.

N. T. Wright, a respected New Testament scholar, translates verses 4b-6 this way: "If anyone has reason to trust in the flesh, I've got more. Circumcised? On the eighth day. Race? Israelite. Tribe? Benjamin. Descent? Hebrew through and through. Torah-observance? A Pharisee. Zealous? I persecuted the church! Official status under the law? Blameless."

Here, Paul doesn't want to reject the religion he grew up in and had become a master teacher of. He didn't believe that taken together it could not hold water when compared to what Jesus offered him. And not just him personally but to the world as well.

The physical human body is not worth much in Jesus' world. While there is nothing inherently wrong with circumcision, it doesn't have much spiritual value. Jesus often teaches that ancestry counts for little in comparison to one's heart.

This is cause for 'happy-feet.' Not because it rejects the Jewish faith but because it gives Judaism a deeper and wider understanding. St. Paul understood that to believe in Jesus is to become a Jew. For him, it was that easy and that wonderful. He does not reject a stricter style of Judaism for those who like that, he just didn't understand why anyone would want that

St. Paul's ultimate concern was for people to know God through knowing Jesus. Here in this passage you can feel his sense of urgency. Its as if he is saying, "Its' OK, memorize the Law, learn the Torah in its original language, after all, I did. Or you can know Jesus." For Paul, it's easy. Why go to all that trouble ... Not to mention the physical pain.

The British traditionalist Rudyard Kipling wrote:

"General Booth of the Salvation Army came on board. I saw him walking backward in the dusk over the uneven wharf, his cloak blown upwards, tulip-fashion, over his grey head, while he beat a tambourine in the face of the singing, weeping, praying crowd who had come to see him off . . . I talked much with General Booth during that voyage. Like the young ass I was, I expressed my distaste at his appearance on Invercargill wharf "Young feller," he replied, bending great brows at me, "if I thought I could win one more soul to the Lord by walking on my head and playing the tambourine with my toes, I'd- I'd learn how."

I think this is how St. Paul felt too. It may be that St. Paul was a Nerd because he loved the minutia of Judaism. It gave him an ordered life and a powerful relation with God through Jesus that called him to a larger life. For Paul God expects of God's people compassion for widows, orphans, and outsiders.

St. Paul seems to feel that Judaism works for some and others, not so much. He is not saying "Don't follow the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, rather he is saying why would anyone desire to do so plus be circumcised, adhere to the kosher regulations, etc. Paul considers all of this a matter of personal choice.

We must not become anti-Semitic but celebrate Pauline truth. We experience God by knowing Jesus Christ. St. Paul eagerly says, "All that I had and all that I was is nothing, compared to all that I am through knowing Christ, which is everything."

Paul did not reject the Law because it did not work. Instead, he abandoned the Torah because Jesus superseded it. Like St. Paul, may we discover the freedom that comes from knowing God in Jesus? Alleluia. Amen.