

Discerning Skubala  
*Preached at El Buen Pastor*

*Philippians 3: 4b-14*

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 lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

My friend, Pastor Jorge, gave me an assignment this year. He asked me to preach on the subject of “How communion with Christ enhances our communion with humanity.” It has been fun to think about, so thank you for the challenge.

The short answer is that to be in communion with Christ *is to be in communion with each other*. But rarely does it happen that we are in communion with groups who are different than we are. My question is why?

To speak of communion is to speak of belonging. Belonging is something every human being desires. To belong is to feel loved. To belong is to feel safe and secure. Belonging is central to our identity.

Except there is a part of belonging that is not healthy for us. We might call it “closed belonging.”

Have you even been part of a group where it wasn’t safe to be or believe something different than the group or you might be excluded? What does it feel like? Probably “less than” or rejection. Probably full of fear and insecurity.

During Covid, there were some very sick people who were dying from the virus. Yet, they refused to admit that it was Covid that was killing them. Doctors would show them positive tests. They were on ventilators. Still, they believed that Covid was a hoax created by the government. Now what would make someone refuse to accept this fact?

Only that they belonged to a closed group who said Covid didn't exist. To admit that it really did exist, even as they were dying from it, would go against what their tribe believed was true. And the feelings of fear and insecurity of their being possibly excluded from the group keeps them from believing anything else. Belonging is such a huge part of our identity it is bigger than life or death.

*Relationality is always more powerful than rationality.*

We see closed belonging when political groups pick on immigrants as targets; and why so many go along with it even though it is wrong. We see it in gang violence on our streets and groups who make fun of kids at school. We see it as legislatures write bills against LGBTQ folks. A group of closed belonging can only exist if they are united against someone who is different. Because it enables them to suppress any differences they might have between themselves.

St. Paul knows about closed belonging too. He once lived it. He lists his credentials and says, "I belonged to a nation—I was a nationalist. I belonged to the strong tribe of the Benjaminite's—the left-handed warriors. I am a Hebrew of Hebrews—a pure blood. I belonged to a religious group who took the bible very seriously. So seriously that, according to it I was as righteous as they come.

I had a strong sense of belonging. I thought I knew who I was and that my belonging was real. Except, I was also a persecutor of the church. And what Christ showed me was any belonging that is based on superiority, or the exclusion of others is completely rubbish. In the Greek language the word is *skubala*, which is the equivalent of the word, "bullpoop" or "caca de la vaca." (Does swearing in ancient Greek still count as swearing?)

St. Paul wasn't saying being Jewish, or a Benjaminite, or even a Pharisee was bad. He is not saying being Christian is superior to any other faith. He is saying that his credentials are all *skubala* because his identity was based on a closed way of belonging which excluded others and persecuted those who were different. Friends, there is a lot of *skubala* out there in our world! And to be truthful, closed belonging can spread into the church as well. Often camouflaged as doctrine, or beliefs, or in the name of being biblically faithful.

So, to understand how our communion with Christ enhances our communion with others is to belong together in a secure way that is open to those who are in different groups and is not based on being closed toward anyone else. And if it is, then we know the group is full of *skubala!*

That is why it was so important for this church to host the broad-based organizing effort a couple of weeks ago. That is why it is important for different groups and faiths to meet in each other's spaces and for us to explore other neighborhoods and have relational meetings with people who are different than our group is. Because it forces us to practice open belonging, which is the direction Christ is always guiding us toward.

So let's practice: turn to your neighbor and tell them, "Aqui eres bienvenido!" Here you belong! "Todos Ustedes!" All of you!

Yes! You belong to an open God. You belong in an open church—all of you. You belong in this country. You belong at this open table. You belong to me and I belong to you. And if anyone tells you something different. Then we know...they are full of *skubala*. Amen!