

The Right Kind of Confidence (4 Oct 2026)

Philippians 3:4-14

Perhaps you have heard of the phrase, a sliding doors moment. Have you heard of this before? It comes from a film from around 30 years ago called Sliding Doors, where we, the viewers, are allowed to see two alternative stories from a woman's life. In one possibility, we see what happens when she dashes for the train and makes it – just. The doors nearly close on her but she squeezes through. In the other possibility, something holds her up at the train station for just a second, and the sliding doors close before she can get on the train. Of course, she doesn't know any different. She lives in the two realities for the rest of the film completely unaware of what might have been. But we, the viewers, know, and so a 'sliding doors moment' has become a way of describing a moment in time or an event that could have gone either way, but which would have made life remarkably different, depending on which reality we found ourselves in.

What would have happened if I had followed that passion and started a career in that field, instead of the one that I ended up in? What if I my parents had bought that house and raised me in that area, instead of the house I grew up in? What if I had acted this way in an important situation or relationship instead of the way that I did?

Well, we'll never know. There's no point living while looking in the rearview mirror. Although, having said that, sometimes it can be a huge relief when we get a glimpse of what life might have been like and get the very strong impression that when the doors closed on us, it was for our own good. We might hear about other people who followed the career we could have and discover it would have been

an awful fit for us. We bump into an old boyfriend or girlfriend and think, 'Wow, I dodged a bullet there. I'm glad that relationship ended', or we realise that an investment we were so sure about, but missed out on, ended up being a dud. And yet, at the time, we might have placed so much importance in these things. We might have given everything for this career not knowing that it was never going to work out, or thought the boyfriend or girlfriend we lost was the only one in the world we would ever find, or felt like our financial situation might never recover after missing out on the investment. Thank God we were spared from such a terrible outcome and the sliding doors closed, even though, at the time, we thought the first option was going to be the best.

St Paul seems to be writing as a person who has experienced a *sliding doors* moment when we hear his words from Philippians today. He was so sure at the time that he was on the right path with his faith. In fact, his confidence could be backed up by all kinds of metrics: he was Jewish, so part of God's chosen people; as a Pharisee, he was an expert in the faith. He stood out from the crowd for his supposedly noble piety, which gained him enormous credit with others around him. This seemed to be a holy guy, an example to others, a person whose salvation was assured. He could be confident of that.

But Jesus' kingdom is not about spiritual self-confidence. In Jesus' kingdom, gaining enormous credit with others counts for nothing. In fact, it can work the other way, because instead of placing our confidence in Christ, we fool ourselves into believing we can place our confidence in what we have done, or in our status in the eyes of others. It is this false spiritual self-confidence that needs to be broken.

So, if Paul had been in Jerusalem, when the Pharisees came to contend with Jesus by testing him and trying to trip him up, as they did in our Gospel reading today, he would have been in their camp. He would have been opposing Jesus and arguing with Jesus, incensed that Jesus might criticise their behaviour and call out their faith and piety as being an act for others that lacked sincerity before God.

Jesus would have lumped Paul with the tenants in the vineyard who are illustrations of the religious authorities in Israel who rejected prophet after prophet, eventually putting Jesus, the Son, to death on a cross. They appeared to work for God, as the tenant appeared to work for the landowner, but they were actually opposed to him. Paul may not have been part of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin or Pilate, or have been in Jerusalem on the day Jesus was crucified, but he certainly led the way in persecuting Christians in the early church, something he wore as a badge of honour - until he met the risen Christ.

And so, Paul can speak about his 'sliding doors' moment. When everything he used to value and place his confidence in all amounted to nothing. He calls them rubbish, or even dung, or maybe even a stronger term in English - there are some who say that Paul uses a word we might not say in church generally - to make it clear how massive it was for him that he dodged that bullet. Imagine if he had stayed the course he was on! He would have been a Pharisee placing his confidence in his own works, his own status and relying on the credit he received from others for a supposedly holy life. But, thank God, Paul's spiritual self-confidence was broken by Christ himself, he was woken up from his delusion and shown the only true place to put his confidence: in the righteousness and mercy of Jesus. He writes, "I consider them (my old ways) rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."

From that point on, Paul was all-in with following Jesus. He says he wants 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.' It's got the sound of a personal testimony about it – this was Paul's turning point, his sliding doors moment, his realisation that he was travelling well through life, confident of his status, and in good standing among others, but was heading fast for destruction.

A lot of people wish they were more self-confident. I can think of nothing worse than being so supremely confident in yourself that you fail to see that you are hurtling away in the wrong direction. Thank God, those doors of the train closed on Paul, and he met the risen Christ.

What about you? Do you think there was a moment, or a period in your life where the doors closed on you and broke your spiritual self-confidence, only for this to be a good thing, because it helped you to realise how much you needed Christ? The train which closed its doors on you at first might have seemed like a disappointment, but you now realise this train was headed away from God and to a life built on false promises. Jesus describes himself as the 'stone that the builders rejected' – were you ever spared from a life when you might have been tempted to reject this stone, even though Jesus would prove himself to be the capstone, the irreplaceable part that holds all things together, including our own lives?

Jesus is a stone worth falling on to shatter our misplaced spiritual self-confidence, as Paul did. Some of the heavy hits we receive in our life might end up being

bigger blessings than we realise, as we live our lives fully reliant on God and not something else.

It's interesting that as much as Paul is relieved beyond words that his spiritual self-confidence was shaken out of him as he fell on the rock of Christ, he doubles his efforts to *commit* to his faith. His confidence makes him anything but complacent. He doesn't pretend that he has obtained everything yet, or that he is somehow perfect, but he presses on to take hold of the things Christ has prepared for him. He has forgotten about looking in the rearview mirror and instead strains for the goal set before him, a 'prize to be won', as he describes it, which God is calling him towards.

Perhaps this is the most telling part for us today. It's not just that there were sliding doors we avoided in the past, thanks be to God. There may be sliding doors in front of us right now, or each day. Anything that lulls us into thinking that something might be more important than Christ, more important than our faith, or the community which brought us into the faith. Paul began this section with words we didn't read today, which say 'Watch out - there are people and things out there that will attempt to distract us from our course.' What a pity it would be to wander through seemingly harmless doors, one after the other, after the other, until we found ourselves far away from Christ. Small habits can do this, slowly eroding our faith in imperceptible ways in the moment, but which, over time, do immeasurable damage.

One of the greatest things about a congregation, like ours, is that there is a sense in which we encourage *each other* to stay the course, to keep straining ahead for the prize. We don't need to look back, and we don't need to be distracted in our focus by things around us. But it's easy to do, especially if you are on your own.

The Apostle Peter describes Christians as living stones, being built together into a spiritual house, where Jesus himself is the cornerstone. We can affirm in each other the wondrous gift we have all received - we've been won back by Christ, rescued from sin and death, and reunited with God our Father. We are recovered stones, redeemed from the scrap heap and repurposed for a holy calling. That's great to celebrate in each other. And, as we all face doors that open up to us different possibilities, but that will ultimately lead us away, we can encourage one another in the joy of the Holy Spirit to stay the course too.

Pastor Dale Gosden

Pentecost 19A

St John's Lutheran Church, Unley