



Thoroughbred: Jesus Christ Gives Us His Righteousness
Philippians 3:4b-14

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
18th Sunday After Pentecost, Sunday, October 8th, 2017
The Rev. Zachary Lysdahl

The Triple Crown is a prestigious race series for horses. The races draw people from all over and in 1972 each race stadium was full of onlookers, many people tuned in on TV too. The big draw? Secretariat, a 3 year old horse who was on form and charging hard. That year Secretariat put on a show at the Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, and the Belmont Stakes. Three races, three wins. Secretariat was the Triple Crown Champion that year. A feat that had not been done in 25 years.

Secretariat was a very special horse because of the wins and because Secretariat was a thoroughbred. In order to be a thoroughbred horse, certain qualities and specifications have to be met. The horse is to have a delicate head, streamlined and perfect for breaking the air at full gallop. Its body is to be slim and it's back short for powerful and deliberate movement. The horse it to have a broad chest and shorter legs for rapid steps. The color of its coat is important too, and Secretariat's was chestnut in color. Most importantly the horse's lineage has to be traced back to the General Stud Book of the English Jockey Club. Body form, speed, color and the purest lineage made Secretariat an unmistakable thoroughbred horse. In all of this Secretariat's identity had been gained by its qualities and results.

For a time the apostle Paul also found his identity in being a thoroughbred. In fact, he even told the church at Philippi so much. He said to them that he was circumcised on the 8th day, which fulfilled God's commandment in the Old Testament. He also told them he was member of the people of Israel, denoting the special relationship he was supposed to have with God by virtue of his nationality. He told them how he was from the tribe of Benjamin, pointing out that he was part the elite of the the Israelite people, not just another common person. He went on to say that he was a Hebrew born of Hebrews, meaning he wasn't half German, a quarter Dutch and part Norwegian. He was full Hebrew and had the lineage to prove it. Paul continued on to say that he was Pharisee. In other words, not only was he a thoroughbred, but he

behaved well and performed well, he devoted himself to studying the law, the Old Testament. Finally he told the Philippians that there was no part of the law which he did not fulfill. Everything the Old Testament said, Paul did to-a-t. All those things made Paul a thoroughbred in his own eyes. [My wife said, "Had Paul been a horse he would have fetched a pretty penny.]

Thoroughbred humans always make me think of the Kennedy family. From that one family came six members of the United States House of Representatives, three state legislators, two U.S. Ambassadors, one president a lieutenant governor, one mayor, and the founder of the National Institutes of Health, as well as, the Special Olympics. Many of them have been Ivy League educated and the family has served the public since 1884. That identity, along with their dashing good looks has given the family has an outright allure, which has captured public attention time and time again. The Kennedys and thoroughbred go hand-in-hand.

Whether a horse or a person, being a thoroughbred has an appeal to it because it offers certain privileges and sets them apart. Paul likely had them within his community. He might have gotten special treatment at social functions such as preferential seating, being served first, or being the keynote speaker. The Kennedy's also have privileges not everyone gets. Things like maybe an extra point or two on a college application or their choice of seat at the fundraiser. Buildings don their name as tribute. Statues are built with their likeness. Seeing those benefits, who doesn't want to be like them? To be a thoroughbred is simply appealing: we like to be liked and we want more privileges.

To a degree we resonate with Paul and his claimed identity as a thoroughbred. We desire to have all the right qualities. The right family. The right education. Live in the right zip code. Have the right career. Go on nice vacations. So we arrange our lives in such a way that we get those things and qualities, or as much of them as we can. All of those things are fine and good, but there is also trouble with the insatiable longing to be a thoroughbred. It can quickly become an idol. When our desire for things or a certain lifestyle orient all we do and say and we set God aside, we have made an idol out of that thing, that lifestyle, that ideal life, that thoroughbred identity. When we do that we set aside our calling to be disciples of Christ and instead take up the things the world says we ought to. We seek after Secretariat's fame, the Kennedy's lifestyle. Or maybe our identity in Christ was set aside long ago - so that we no longer notice when we choose something else over God.

It might not seem like a desire in our lives has morphed into idolatry, but the thing about idolatry is that it's tricky, causing us to be obsessed with having zero new emails in our inbox. Or our rearranging of the family plans to watch big game or cancelling altogether. Or when our first thoughts in the morning are about the cup of coffee, and not the grace of God freely given to us. Idolatry can be big or little and it is always sneaky, working to disrupt, and worse, replace our relationship with God with something inconsequential. In Christ, your lifestyle, privileges, and fame don't matter. What truly matters, who you are, has been given to you in Jesus Christ.

In verse nine Paul says those qualities which made him a thoroughbred are actually rubbish. Lineage, social standing, and all the other qualities are nothing more than garbage, because they are not our real identity. Paul says the only thing that truly matters is that we are made righteous before God through Jesus Christ. What is righteousness? Righteousness, given to us through Jesus Christ, restores us into proper relationship with God (Barclay). Our identity, our righteousness is not earned, but given to us by God in Jesus Christ.

For many, thoroughbred-ness makes them feel secure, because the world sees them, deems them perfect. But that is not what truly matters, nor is it our true identity. We cannot earn righteousness, our identity has been earned for us, by Jesus' death on the cross. God's holy standards were met, for you. Jesus made it so grace and righteousness are yours. In Jesus Christ you have been declared righteous before God and nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Knowing our identity comes from Jesus Christ, let's talk about what that means for us. If our true identity has been given to us by God, and we are already righteous before him, there is nothing left to prove, which should make placing God first easy. So our challenge this week is to pause before we commit to another event, another outing, another...whatever, and ask ourselves if we want to say yes because it makes us look good, increases our social standings and bolsters privileges or because we feel Christ leading us to do it. As Christians, we do not do things to look good, but live in response to what Jesus Christ has given us, our true identity, our righteousness.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.