

Blue Ribbon Church: *Philippians 1:1-11*

Norwalk Christian Church, August 12, 2018, State Fair Sunday, Proper 14 (diverted from lectionary)

It all began with a bunch of knights in the late 1500s called *Le Cordon Bleus*. They were an impressive, exclusive order of French knights created by King Henry the Third, and each knight was said to have worn a special cross hung from their neck by a blue ribbon.

That's what "le cordon bleu" means: blue ribbon. It is said that these knights would have sumptuous feasts, and over time "le cordon bleu" became associated with food of the utmost quality. Later, that phrase was chosen as the name of the famous cooking school, *Le Cordon Bleu*, attended by the famous Julia Child.

But before long, "le cordon bleu" was associated with more than knights and fine food. When translated into old english, the phrase became blue rhiban: r-h-i-b-a-n. Blue Rhiban horses races were some of the first competitions where winners could receive a blue ribbon. Later, the boat that held the record for the fastest trip across the atlantic, from Britain to the US, was known as the Blue Rhiban.

And not long after that, blue RH-ib-an became blue RIBBON, awarded to first place winners of races and competitions. Feats of strength. And for any numerous things at the county and state fairs.

At the Iowa State Fair, you can get a blue ribbon for photography, painting, for a prize cow, bull, hog, or chicken, for a pie or jelly, or a gigantic pumpkin.

We even have blue ribbon winners in our church. This year, Peg Johnston's basket won the blue ribbon for Best in Show, and Betty Becker's won second place.

Thursday, a boar named "Itty Bitty" got the blue ribbon in the "Big Boar Contest", weighing in at 1,163 pounds, only 2 pounds larger than second place Yo-Yo. The superintendent of the Swine Bar said it was the closest competition in their history.

Other blue ribbons have already been given to Casey Perkins of Silver Lake for the tallest stalk of corn, stretching to an impressive 24 feet, 9 inches, which towered above the second place stalk at only 16 feet, 4 inches. Kendall and Caroline Grubb of West Des Moines won the 1 year old most alike twins blue ribbon.

And, perhaps my favorite, Seth Eberhardt, Mediapolis, won the blue ribbon in the dollhouse competition for his miniature country church, complete with tiny Bibles and hymnals, it was adorable.

Which got me thinking...what would a church have to do to win the blue ribbon.

Now, I know. Our text this morning has nothing to do with vegetables, baskets, dollhouses or swine. I'm not sure what the Apostle Paul would've thought about the Iowa State Fair. He was a tentmaker, so maybe he would've been home in the leather tanning area with the replica Tee Pees.

But I think Paul would understand this idea of "blue ribbons". He speaks in a few of his letters about a crown, a reference to the leafy victor's crown given to the winners of ancient races.

One reference is a few chapters away from our text this morning, Philippians 4:1, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved."

Here, Paul calls this church he's writing to, the Philippians, his crown. He is proud of this church. Their faithfulness is his reward. They are his blue ribbon.

In other words, Paul won the blue ribbon for this church, the Philippians.

We can see, right off when the letter begins, that Paul has great affection for this church.

"I thank my God every time I remember you," he says. "It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart... For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus."

And what was it about this church that caused such affection. What was it that made won the blue ribbon?

It's their love! Their love for Paul. Their love for God. This church knows how to love! They aren't perfect, but they are growing in love, and this wins them the blue ribbon.

"This is my prayer," Paul says, "that your love may overflow more and more."

There are a lot of things we can compete in. But Paul challenges them to compete in love. Strive to be the best in show in love. Win the blue ribbon in love.

Now, if you've been around churches a lot, you've seen the way churches like to compete. Often, blue ribbons are given for the largest church in town, or the best praise band, or the best preaching, the largest budget, the prettiest building, the best coffee for coffee fellowship, the best VBS.

And we will brag and brag about our blue ribbons until we are blue in the face.

But here's the deal, Norwalk Christian: we aren't the largest church in town, we don't have a praise band, our preaching is...well, we give it a try, at least. As Gary Fox has

shared, we aren't quite meeting budget this year (but you are stepping up and the year isn't over yet!). Our building may not be the prettiest, our coffee is Folgers, and we don't even have a VBS.

But take courage! Don't go home from the fair just yet. Paul, the Superintendent of Church competition, isn't praying that our coffee improves. He says nothing about budgets or the music program or even the preaching. Most churches Paul knew met in homes, not church buildings, and Paul wouldn't even have a clue what a VBS was.

These things, these are not what Paul is looking for. He's looking for love. Paul's prayer is that we win the blue ribbon in love.

So Church, yes! We should strive for excellence--excellence in love.

We should seek to be the best in show in love.

The largest love church.

The church that doesn't just love when it's easy, but loves when it's hard.

The church that doesn't just love those who are accepted, but loves the outcasts.

The church that loves those difficult to love.

The church that loves those others may hate.

The church that loves and loves and loves some more.

And if that's what we strive for, church...if our love, like that giant stalk of corn or giant pumpkin, keeps on growing and growing, overflowing it's edges, then we will be a blue ribbon church.

Our example of love is Christ, who invites us now to his communion table. It may not be a *Le Cordon Bleu* feast like those knights of old, but this is a blue ribbon banquet of exquisite love, God's finest, given for you and me.

And today, after you receive communion, we invite you to receive a blue ribbon. We should have one for everyone.

Take it today as a reward for excellence in love, and as a reminder of what Jesus told us, "That they will know you are Christians by your love."

And then go from this table and from this place, and let your love grow. Let your love overflow, more and more and more and more and more and more and more!

Let God's blue-ribbon people say amen!

Amen!